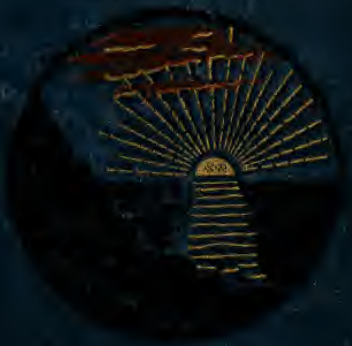

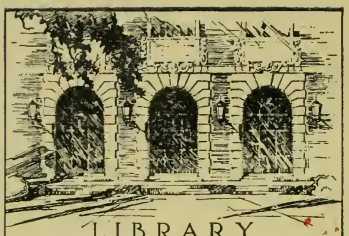

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NARKA.

A Novel.

BY

KATHLEEN O'MEARA,

AUTHOR OF 'FREDERIC OZANAM,' 'IZA'S STORY,' 'MADAME MOHL, HER SALON AND HER FRIENDS,' 'THE OLD HOUSE IN PICARDY,' ETC., ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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NARKA.

CHAPTER I.

THE WOLF.

IT was All Souls' Eve. The winter was setting in early, and threatened, or perhaps we should say promised, to be a severe one; for a hard winter was not looked upon as a misfortune at Yrakow, the ancestral home of Prince Zorokoff. Ice and snow brought too many pleasures in their train ever to be unwelcome there.

A group, consisting of young Prince Basil Zorokoff, his brother-in-law, M. de Beaucrillon,

and three ladies, was assembled in an old-fashioned tapestried room of the castle. The two men were smoking cigarettes, and discussing sport between long-drawn puffs. The three ladies were sitting round the samovar. They presented three as distinct types as could have been brought together with a view to the improvement of each by contrast.

Sibyl, Comtesse de Beaucrillon, the daughter of the house, was as blond as a Scandinavian, with light blue eyes and fair hair; her hands were so small as to be almost out of proportion with her figure, which was tall and full; they were round and dimpled like a baby's, with the delicate nails and pink finger-tips that one seldom sees in perfection except in babies. Her movements had the subtle, fascinating grace that reminded you of a kitten, or rather of a young cat, for there was nothing of the undignified friskiness of a kitten about Sibyl; she was patrician to the tips of her fingers; her manners united the refined elegance of a Frenchwoman with the soft serpentine grace of the women of the North.

Marguerite de Beaucrillon was just below the middle height, but she looked tiny beside her stately sister-in-law. She had no pretensions to beauty, yet her face was pleasanter to look at than many a beautiful one; her clear olive skin, her warm colour, her wistful bright brown eyes, her dimples, and her glossy hair were suggestive of youth, health, and happiness, and these natural advantages were set off by the most becoming toilets; for Marguerite had a French girl's taste and principles about dress, and considered it seriously as one of the daily duties of her state of life. She was careful and very successful in her combination of colours and effects. Yet you would never have accused her of coquetry in the ordinary sense. If you had been so uncharitable, one glance into her face would have converted you. Her eyes were as free from consciousness as a child's, and their language was as transparent. Sibyl used to say to her, 'If you don't want people to see what you are thinking of, drop your lids, for those eyes of yours are like windows into

your brain, that let one see your thoughts coming and going.'

Narka Larik, the adopted sister of Madame de Beaucrillon, was the tallest of the three women, and cast in altogether an ampler mould. If her figure had been less perfectly proportioned, it might have seemed too large ; her great, luminous blue-black eyes, sometimes quite blue, sometimes quite black, were soft as velvet, but under the softness there lurked intimation of a fiery vitality ready to awake and emit sparks at the lightest touch ; her mouth was, perhaps, a trifle too full for classical perfection, but its curves were so exquisite, the sensitive play of the lips so lovely, that you never thought of criticising ; the clear tint of her complexion was like the whiteness of some white flower ; her hair, of that warm, red gold beloved of Titian, was knotted in thick coils at the back of her head, and fell in rippling waves over her low square forehead. There was something wild in the character of Narka's beauty, in the lines of her figure ; she stood and

moved with the strong, elastic ease of a panther, or of some other grand, free, untamed creature. Beautiful, incomparably more beautiful than Sibyl, there was, nevertheless, something wanting in her beauty which Sibyl's possessed—something impalpable but distinct, which marks the difference between a highly finished work of art and a spontaneous growth of Nature in her happiest and most generous mood. This difference was not noticeable except when the patrician sister was brought into close contact with the plebeian, and even then no one was conscious of it, perhaps, but Narka herself. She knew that she was beautiful, and far more gifted in many ways than Sibyl, and yet she felt as much her inferior as the lowly born maid in mediæval times may have felt herself below the noble demoiselle in whose train she was brought up.

The three friends were chatting over their teacups, planning costumes for a fancy ball that was to take place at the castle before Christmas.

'I wish I could hit upon something that would combine *everything*,' Marguerite said, putting her head on one side with a pretty bird-like motion, which always bewitched Basil Zorokoff.

'Why don't you consult me, cousin?' he said, holding out his cigarette between his first and second fingers, and gazing steadily at Marguerite, while the twinkle in his blue eyes belied the extreme seriousness of his handsome face.

'Well?' said Marguerite, with another bewitching turn of her head from left to right.

'Little Red Riding Hood would suit you to perfection. The colour would be becoming, and your eyes would shine like diamonds under the scarlet hood, and you would look like a Lilliputian Venus in the short petticoats.'

'And you would play the Wolf, and howl at me?'

'And crunch you up; that I should do with great satisfaction!'

'How many wolves' skins would it take to

make a costume for you, I wonder?' said Marguerite, measuring the tall young fellow's height with a glance of saucy impertinence. 'A pity it is so early in the winter, or you might go and shoot half a dozen. How exciting it must be to hear them howling in the forest! They never come till Christmas, do they?'

Basil had not time to answer, when a distant sound, penetrating through the heavily curtained windows, made them all start.

'There it is again!' said Narka.

'What is it?' asked Marguerite.

'Listen!'

Sibyl held up her finger, and the gentlemen put down their cigarettes.

A long dismal howl, perceptibly nearer this time, was again audible.

'Is it a wolf?' asked Marguerite, under her breath.

'At this time of the year!' said M. de Beaucrillon. 'You were just now telling me that they never came till the snow was deep?'

'No more they do,' replied Basil. 'I never before knew, except when I was a child——'

'There it is again!' interrupted Sibyl, 'and this time quite close. Let us go up to the gallery!'

'Oh, how dreadful!' exclaimed Marguerite, who seemed too horrified to move. 'If he were to dash at the windows and break in!'

'He certainly would if he saw you, little cousin,' said Basil; 'but as he can't, we have nothing to fear. Come along up to the gallery, and see what a live wolf looks like.'

He drew her arm through his, and led her off, excited and only half reluctant. The others had all fled up before them, and were already grouped in the deep mullioned window at the farther end of the gallery, the only one that was in shadow, for it was a brilliant night, and the full moon, riding high in the heavens, sent, as her largess, broad bars of silver light through the row of eight windows on one side of the gallery. Basil, still holding Marguerite's arm within his,

joined the others, and they all stood watching.

The broad gravel drive shone like granite in the dazzling whiteness of the moonshine; one wing of the castle was in black shadow, the other in brilliant light, every arch and moulding carved in ebony and silver.

'Where is the brute sneaking?' said Basil, in a low voice.

'He can't be far off,' said Narka; 'the last howl was very close.'

They waited with bated breath. Nothing stirred. The park was so silent you might have heard the stars scintillating.

'Look! there he is!' exclaimed Sibyl, in a whisper, pointing towards the clock tower, that was in shadow.

They pressed closer, and strained their eyes.

'I see him!' Marguerite cried, and shuddering, she clutched Basil's arm, as if safety lay in his coat-sleeve.

Basil bore it manfully. 'Never fear, little cousin. See, he is coming on!'

The beast advanced a few steps and paused, one half of his lank gray body in shadow, the other in sheen. Suddenly he pricked his ears, held one forefoot suspended, and turned his head towards the park in an attitude of intense listening.

'Does he hear something?' asked M. de Beaucrillon.

'It looks like it,' Basil replied uneasily. 'I will fetch my gun.'

'So will I,' said his brother-in-law. And they hurried away together.

Presently the wolf turned his head towards the house, moved forward a few steps, and glared up with his red eye-balls.

To Marguerite there was something delicious in the combination of horror and a sense of comfortable safety that she experienced in looking down at the ferocious animal from behind thick stone walls.

'Do you think he heard us speaking?' she asked, almost under her breath.

Narka's fear and Sibyl's was that he had heard something else. What an age the

gentlemen were in bringing their fire-arms! They had in reality been away about two minutes.

'Oh, here they come!' said Sibyl.

'Open the window as quickly and quietly as you can,' said Basil. But before there was time to obey, the wolf turned his head, and uttering a long howl, bounded off, and disappeared round the clock tower.

'Confound the brute!' muttered Basil.

'I wonder why he darted away so suddenly?' said Narka.

'Probably it was some noise in the thicket, an animal prowling about,' replied Basil; but he did not seem convinced.

'Suppose it were some one coming through the park?' suggested Marguerite. 'How awful if it were!'

'Nobody is likely to be out this time of night,' returned her cousin.

'Hush! listen!' cried M. de Beaucrillon, laying his hand on Basil's shoulder.

Every ear was strained. Yes, there was a sound of galloping hoofs in the distance.

'Ought we to send out men with fire-arms?' asked Sibyl.

'Where to?' said Basil. 'That sound comes from the left, and the brute made for the forest. Besides, no one would be abroad at this hour without fire-arms. I dare say it is Larchoff. I met him riding in to X. this afternoon. He often rides back late. He is sure to be armed. It would be a good joke if the wolf pulled him down and made a meal of him!'

'No such luck!' said Narka; 'beasts of a species do not prey on each other.'

This speech sounded unnaturally cynical on the lips of a young girl. Marguerite shrank imperceptibly away from her, and moved closer to Basil. M. de Beaucrillon felt the same repulsion so strongly that, under pretence of putting aside his gun, he went out of the room.

Presently Basil carried his to a safe corner, and then, stepping into the deep embrasure of one of the windows flooded with light, called to Marguerite to join him. She went trip-

ping lightly across the polished floor, and they stood together looking out at the moonlit landscape.

Sibyl and Narka remained alone. They were both more disturbed than they wished to appear. Superstitious as genuine Muscovites, the coming of the wolf before the seasonable time was to them an ill-omen, all the more alarming from its vagueness. 'The wolf waits for the white carpet,' was a saying of the peasants; and when he appeared before the carpet was spread, some calamity was certain to follow.

'Well, cousin, you have had a glimpse of one of our winter amusements. How do you like it?' asked Basil.

'I don't like it at all,' replied Marguerite.

'You were saying, only a little while ago, that it must be so exciting, and wanting me to turn wolf and howl at you.'

'Do you think that wolf overheard me?'

'I will tell you a secret,' said Basil: 'I asked the brute to come and howl for you

to-night. At first he flatly refused, like the brute that he is; then I bribed him.'

'What bribe did you offer him?'

'You won't tell?' He bent his tall figure down until his moustache almost touched her ear; 'I told him that Larchoff was coming this way, and that he could sup off him.'

'Oh!' said Marguerite, drawing away with a little shudder. 'Why do you want that poor man to be devoured by a wild beast?'

'Because that poor man is more destructive than any wild beast alive: he is the devil!'

'Is he so wicked? Who is he?'

'Who is Larchoff? He is our neighbour, and dates his descent from Peter the Great, who gave the family a title. He is a liar and a hypocrite; as cruel as a tiger, and as greedy as a wolf; cowardly as a rat, and dishonest as a Jew. He has all the bad instincts of man and beast combined; he is only fit company for the devil, and that is where the curses of good men are speeding him night and day.'

'Ah! but that is wicked!' said Marguerite,

with a shudder. 'They ought to pray for him that he may repent.'

'Pray for Larchoff!' Basil threw back his head with a low laugh; the notion of anybody praying for Larchoff was immensely funny to him. 'If the prayers were heard, and that fiend were to repent and enter the kingdom of heaven, I hope I may go somewhere else! He has done more evil and made more men and women miserable than any man of this generation—unless, perhaps, his master the Czar. You know about old Larchoff, this fellow's father? No? Sibyl never told you? Well, listen. Jacob Larik, Narka's father, was a Jew; they are a vile race, but Jacob was an exception—he was honest, and very rich. He traded in furs, and he was clever and industrious, as the Jews mostly are. He lived in one of Larchoff's villages, unluckily. One day Larchoff, who, like his son, was always in want of money, went to Jacob, and said he must pay down fifty thousand roubles or pack up. Of course Jacob paid them. At

the end of six months Larchoff came down on him for another fifty thousand. Jacob paid again; and so it went on until there was no more blood in the stone. Then Jacob fell on his knees and besought Larchoff, for the sake of the God of Abraham, to spare him and give him time to gain the money, and he would go on working and paying while he could; but Larchoff spat on him, and mocked him, and then went off and denounced him as being deep in a plot against the life of the Emperor. The poor wretch was seized, and flogged and tortured to make him confess; and as he could not confess, he was sent to Siberia. Fortunately he died on the road.'

'Oh my God! . . . And Narka?'

'Narka was a small toddle at the time. She and her brother Sergius and Madame Larik came to live with us. Narka was educated with Sibyl, Sergius with me; he was such a dear good fellow, and so clever! He wanted to be a physician, and just after old Larchoff died he passed his examinations

brilliantly. We were all proud of him, and everybody made much of him; all the people in the district invited him and made a fuss over him. It was very foolish, for it enraged Larchoff *fils;* he knew that his father had been hated for the murder, as it was called, of old Jacob, and that he himself was hated as much as his father. He resolved to be revenged on us all by ruining Sergius. He went and denounced the poor fellow. Oh, it was a fiendish piece of work!' muttered Basil, with suppressed passion.

'What happened him?'

'Sergius? He was sent to Siberia.'

'And is he there still?'

'Yes—his bones are there. He lived three years at the gold diggings, and then luckily he died. Poor Sergius!' Basil's voice shook with emotion.

After a silence Marguerite said, 'And his mother, and Narka?'

'They lived through it, as people do. It broke their hearts; but people live with

broken hearts, as they do with broken legs. We were all very fond of them. Sibyl and Narka are like sisters; my mother always spoke of Narka as her adopted child, and after her death the two were inseparable.'

'And that cruel, horrid man stays on here? Does anybody speak to him?'

'Speak to him! They cringe to him, they lick his feet.'

'*You* never speak to him?'

'I spoke to him no later than this afternoon.'

'Oh!' in a tone of shocked astonishment.

'My child, if I offended Larchoff, in spite of my father's present influence at Court, he would never rest till he had sent me and all belonging to me after the Lariks.'

'Is it possible? Why, he must be the devil!'

'My sweet cousin, I began by telling you that he was.'

'And is there nothing to protect people against him? Is there no law in Russia?'

'Yes; there is the law of might and cunning.'

After a moment's silence Marguerite said, in a confidential *sotto voce*, looking up at Basil :

'I wonder why you don't get up a revolution. If I were a Russian, I should be a Nihilist—is not that what you call them ?'

Basil's eyes flashed, and he made a sudden movement as if he would have caught her in his arms ; but he checked himself, and said, with a laugh :

'If you preach treason of that sort, petite Française, I will tell Larchoff, and you will be escorted to the frontier immediately, and perhaps get a whipping first.'

While this conversation was going on in the deep recess of one window, Sibyl and Narka were talking confidentially in another.

'I wonder whether Basil thinks at all seriously of Sophie ?' Sibyl remarked. 'I do long to see him married and out of harm's way !'

'Are you sure that to marry him to the sister of Ivan Gorff would be taking him out of harm's way ?'

Sibyl did not answer.

'Supposing it were,' resumed Narka, 'I could understand *your* overlooking a good deal to make him settle down, as you say; but I can't see how the Prince should desire such a marriage for his son. Paul Gorff was a trader, and Ivan carries on his father's business—on a grand scale, it is true; still, he is in trade; and the daughter and sister of a trader is not the wife one would expect Prince Zorokoff to select for his son.'

'It is hardly a selection. Who else is there to prefer to Sophie? She is the only girl in the district. Basil never goes to St. Petersburg except to pay his court to the Emperor and rush back. You know how he entertains us caricaturing all the girls he sees there? Then Sophie's mother was noble; it was considered a dreadful disgrace her making that *mésalliance* with Paul Gorff. Besides, she is sole heiress to her uncle's enormous fortune, and Basil, with all his indifference to money, knows very well that it is not a thing to be despised; for I suspect

my father is melting down his own fortune and ours as fast as he can at St. Petersburg.'

Narka did not reply. She knew well enough that the Gorff money-bags were the bait that was making Prince Zorokoff swallow his pride, and court the trader's pretty daughter for his son. But would Basil prove an accomplice in the transaction ?

'Basil is far too proud to make a *mésalliance* for money,' continued Sibyl, contradicting her last words, for she felt instinctively what was in Narka's mind ; 'but he does admire Sophie. Besides, he is so chivalrous I believe he would make any sacrifice to deliver her from that brute Larchoff. Ivan says that Larchoff is trying hard to ingratiate himself, and Sophie naturally loathes the sight of him ; but if she were to let Larchoff see this, the consequences might be awful to herself and Ivan. We know of what Larchoff is capable.'

'Yes,' replied Narka, in a level undertone ; 'and it would not be pleasant to have his

vengeance turned upon Basil as a successful rival.'

Before Sibyl could answer, M. de Beaucrillon interrupted them.

'It appears the whole house is in a commotion about the wolf,' he said. 'My man tells me they are prophesying the most appalling events—fires, earthquakes, murders, and I know not what—on the strength of it.'

'They are a pack of fools!' Basil called out, walking up with Marguerite through the checkered light. 'That wolf came with the best intentions, solely to amuse Marguerite. To-morrow he will provide entertainment for you by giving us an opportunity to hunt him.'

'Your Russian hospitality is sublime, mon cher,' replied M. de Beaucrillon; 'the very wild beasts are summoned to contribute to the enjoyment of your guests.'

And so, laughing, they went out of the gallery together, and separated for the night.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUNT.

THE sensation caused by the appearance of the wolf was increased rather than lessened next morning by the prospect of a hunt, which diverted the superstitious terrors of the household into more healthy excitement. It was a splendid day; the sky was clear as sapphire, and the frosty landscape glittered in the morning light. The news had been taken down to the village at daybreak, and when the ladies came downstairs, the hunt was assembled on the lawn, every available man in the household being present with his gun; the villagers and moujiks in their costumes

and sheepskins, the dogs in force, and all in high good-humour.

Narka and Sibyl entered into the prospect of the sport with keen gusto; but though Marguerite was alive to the picturesque side of the adventure, the idea of a close encounter with such ferocious game was too terrifying to admit of her entering into it with any sympathy.

'Why not set traps for the wolf, instead of exposing men's lives in going to hunt him?' she asked, as they watched the scene on the lawn.

'But then where would be the sport?' replied Narka.

'Yes; that is what the men delight in,' said Sibyl; 'and that is what wolves are for —to make sport for them.'

'It is the nature of men, I suppose, to like such sport,' said Marguerite; 'but I can't understand your liking it for them. Just think if the wolf were to turn on Gaston or Basil, and kill either of them!'

'Chérie, I'm not going to think anything

so unpleasant,' cried Sibyl. 'You are a little coward, you French girl!'

'Yes, I am; but at any rate I have the courage of my cowardice—I'm not ashamed to own it.'

'There is no shame in being a coward for those we love,' said Sibyl caressingly.

Marguerite blushed scarlet.

'No,' she said; 'I dare say even Gaston would be frightened if he saw me going out to fight a wolf.' Then, with a little sudden turn of her head, she looked away.

Narka saw the blush, and saw the movement to hide it. Did 'those they love' include for Marguerite somebody besides Gaston? Girls don't blush violently at being suspected of cowardice on their brothers' behalf.

'Here comes Ivan Gorff,' said Sibyl, as there emerged from round the clock tower a broad-shouldered, loosely jointed, bushy-headed young man.

Basil broke from a distant group to go and greet him. As the two men walked up the

broad gravel path they presented a striking contrast. Basil was the type of the polished, highly civilized Russian seigneur, very tall, with clear complexion, blue eyes, abundant fair hair, and golden moustache; his countenance was frank and full of intelligence, with a singular mobility of expression.

Ivan Gorff was by no means vulgar or ill-looking, but his large head and massive shoulders, his loosely built frame and his heavy, shuffling gait, showed to increased disadvantage beside the finely proportioned figure and noble bearing of the young Prince.

Ivan paid his respects to the three ladies, raising their hands to his lips after the chivalrous fashion of his countrymen; but he performed the ceremony with a *brusquerie* which was the result not so much of shyness as of a certain awkwardness that seems to be inseparable from a badly built human frame.

'What does the village say, Ivan Gorff?' inquired Sibyl.

'It says that a pack of wolves, variously estimated from five to five-and-twenty, came

down and kept up a howling round the castle from midnight till dawn,' replied Ivan.

'That is how history gets written,' observed M. de Beaucrillon.

'What do they say brought the wolf down?' inquired Sibyl.

'They say he came for no good; they are terrified out of their wits.'

'They are a pack of idiots,' said Basil; 'I suspect some rogue has been trapping cubs in the forest, and the mother came down to look for them. The howl sounded uncommonly like the call of the she-wolf.'

'That was the first thing that occurred to me,' said Ivan; 'but they all swore they knew nothing about cubs being trapped.'

'They were sure to swear that anyhow,' laughed Basil.

'By the way,' said Ivan, 'the wolf was near trapping a cub of the devil's last night. Larchoff came up with him on the road, and if he had not put a bullet through the brute in time, and sent him yelling away on three legs, he was a dead man.'

'Whom did he tell that stunning lie to?' asked Basil.

'Father Christopher; he met Larchoff this morning on his way to see some sick woman in the wood.'

'I wish Father Christopher did not meet him so often,' said Basil; 'he may brave the fellow once too often, and my father may not be able to pull him out of his fangs.'

'Father Christopher never thinks of that,' said Narka; 'he only thinks of sparing the peasants, of putting himself between them and Larchoff's cruelty. If it were not for Father Christopher, Larchoff would be flaying them alive, and flogging them of a morning to get an appetite for his breakfast.'

'Oh!' Marguerite gave a little scream.

'She is only joking, cousin,' said Basil. 'You should not say those things before her,' he added, angrily, to Narka.

'No; it is bad for her French nerves,' observed M. de Beaucrillon. He said it seriously, almost solemnly; but Sibyl suspected he was mocking.

'The Father is imprudent,' she remarked; 'it would be much better for everybody concerned if he tried to conciliate Larchoff.'

'Yes,' said Ivan; 'if he would just my-Lord-Count him and flatter him a bit, it would serve the peasants better.'

'The Father is too honest to flatter anybody,' said Narka, 'much less such a vile thing as Larchoff.'

'Pshaw!' retorted Ivan—'the notion of wasting fine sentiment on a wolf! One talks to a fool according to his folly, and one treats a savage as a savage. The Father will find out his mistake too late if he doesn't change his tactics towards Larchoff. Paul the cobbler heard high words between them on the road this morning; he did not catch what the quarrel was about, but Larchoff shouted, "If you can't keep your tongue warm, you had better pack up." "I am always packed up," said the Father; "I am ready to start every day, and I would rather take the road to Siberia this minute than abet your villainy by holding my tongue." Paul saw them from

behind the wall, and he says Larchoff looked like a mad bull and the Father like an angry lion, his head thrown back and his white hair fluttering.'

'I wish the Father would try and keep out of his way,' said Sibyl.

'There is no keeping out of the devil's way,' said Basil. 'He is always about, seeking whom he may devour.'

A horn sounded from the lawn.

'Come! let us be on the march,' said Basil.

The three gentlemen went out, and presently the hunt moved on. The ladies watched it out of sight, but when Sibyl turned from the window she missed Marguerite.

'She has gone to pray that they may not be devoured by the wolf,' said Narka, in answer to her companion's exclamation of surprise.

'Does she care so very much, do you think —I mean for Basil?'

'She cares enough, I dare say, to say a prayer for him in an emergency.'

Sibyl sat down to her tapestry. Narka stood looking out of the window.

'What a blessing it would be if Basil were to fall in love with Marguerite!' said Sibyl, with a sigh as soft and long-drawn as the silk she was pulling through her canvas.

Narka gave a curious smile. 'You were heaving a heavy sigh last night that he might fall in love with Sophie.'

'I would sigh for a month if it would help him to fall in love with Marguerite. Sophie has some essentials that would suit, but Marguerite has everything. And she is so gentle!'

'Are you sure such a gentle wife is what Basil wants?'

'He admires gentleness in a woman immensely. Most men do.'

'It does not follow that it would suit him best. Basil wants a wife whom he could lean upon—a woman who would guide him. Now, Sophie has plenty of character, and a very strong will; she turns her brother round her finger.'

'I should not like Basil to be turned round

his wife's finger. But you are mistaken in fancying that Marguerite lacks character; she has plenty of character, only it is kept down by her French training. Wait till she is married, and then you will see how she will develop. French girls are all like that.'

'Would she marry a schismatic?'

'Ah, that is the one obstacle! But if Basil tried, I am certain he might overcome it. If he would only make Marguerite fall in love with him!'

Something magnetic made Sibyl turn and look at Narka.

'Why do you smile like that?' she said. 'Don't you think a girl might love Basil?'

'You and I have managed to love him.'

'How silly you are sometimes with all your cleverness, Narka! I mean a girl who is nothing to him. If I were a girl—not his sister—I am sure I should easily fall in love with him. Don't you think you could?—if he tried to make you?'

'Perhaps. The Princess used to say that

a woman never could tell whether a man could make her love him or not until he tried. I dare say she was right.'

Sibyl raised her right hand, and let it drop lightly on the canvas with a gesture of utter amazement. 'To think that you of all women should not believe Basil capable of winning any girl he set his heart on!' she exclaimed —'Basil, who has everything that can make a man charming!'

'Charm is very much a matter of individual taste and sympathy,' said Narka, and she lapsed into silence.

Presently, she turned from the window and went to the piano, and sat down, running her fingers over the keys in an impromptu prelude; she accompanied it at first in a low, almost inarticulate, murmur; but by degrees the tones rose, and the rich voice gave forth its power, uttering in music the passionate thought that seemed so often folded in Narka's silence, and never expressed itself freely but in song. Her voice was one of those rare and splendid instruments that

combine every quality: the warm, mellow tones of a contralto, and the range of a soprano, the high notes ringing out with bell-like clearness, while the lower ones were soft as poured out oil; it was a voice that would have made a fortune on the stage, so powerful it was, so brilliant, and at the same time of such melting sweetness. Narka never looked so beautiful as when she was singing, and she would go on warbling and trilling for hours, never tired, like a bird whose natural speech was song.

CHAPTER III.

NARKA AND MARGUERITE EXCHANGE VIEWS ABOUT MANY THINGS.

THE wolf-hunt proved a failure. The sportsmen came home without having seen or scented the game of which they had gone in search. It had been ascertained, however, that a peasant in one of Larchoff's villages had trapped a cub two days before, and carried it off to his family in the village beyond Yrakow. This discovery was a great relief to the population, and calmed their terrors by giving a natural explanation to the premature appearance of the unwelcome visitor : it was evident the mother had come down to look for her stolen cub.

'All the same,' Narka remarked, 'I wish the week were past, and that we were safe over the adventure.'

'You don't seriously believe that it forebodes evil?' said M. de Beaucrillon, looking at her with amused incredulity.

'I seriously believe in precedent and tradition,' replied Narka. 'It is a thing unprecedented for the wolf to come down before the snow without some calamity suddenly following. In the Prince's childhood a wolf was seen in the village one night in October, and the next day a fire broke out, and two-thirds of the houses were burnt down.'

'That is conclusive evidence, certainly; the wolf was an incendiary,' observed M. de Beaucrillon gravely.

'It is very well for you to laugh, Gaston,' said Sibyl; 'but you have your superstitions in Burgundy too, and traditions and precedents that everybody at Beaucrillon believes in. I wish we were safe over the week.'

'A week is the limit of the danger?' said

Gaston, with provoking coolness; 'if it is not fulfilled within that time, the wolf is voted a false prophet?'

'It so happens that hitherto it always has been fulfilled within the week,' replied Sibyl.

M. de Beaucrillon in his secret soul hoped that it would be fulfilled this week. He was beginning to feel the place so deadly dull that it would have been a mercy if the wolf brought any change to enliven things. Even a fire in the village would be better than nothing. Gaston had only been three weeks at Yrakow, and it was palling on him horribly. The magnificent vastness of the castle, the barbaric splendour of the interior, the immensity of the grounds, the immensity of the forest, the scale of immensity on which everything within and without was constructed, made the sense of desolateness produced by the smallness of the social element proportionately immense. The immobility of life in this enormous palace, with its galleries as long as streets, and its rooms as big as courts, and its halls as vast as

ordinary squares, was overpowering. There were seventy servants in the household, but they made no more life in the place than the flies on the pane. M. de Beaucrillon sauntered through the vast apartments, and smoked countless cigars, and felt as if he were walking in an enchanted castle where everybody was under a spell of somnolence. Basil was an excellent host, and did all he could to wake up the sleeping inhabitants, but Basil himself was under the spell. He did not understand the need for being always awake ; he went spasmodically from mercurial activity to absolute idleness, from hunting a wolf, and similar outdoor exercises, to lounging by the hour on the flat of his back with a cigar in his mouth ; he spent hours dreaming and writing in his private study, emerging thence in alternate moods of high excitement and profound melancholy. M. de Beaucrillon was very fond of his brother-in-law, but he did not understand him ; Basil, for all his physical strength and reckless courage, seemed to him more a

woman than a man, a creature made up of contradictions, of impulses, of passionate emotions and exaggerations.

The day after the hunt, Marguerite and Narka went out for a ride. As they passed through the village, Narka pointed out the cottage where she and her mother resided since Sibyl's marriage.

'You must take me to pay a visit to Madame Larik as soon as she's well enough,' said Marguerite. 'When will that be?'

'In a few days, I hope,' Narka replied, looking pleased and grateful. 'She has been much better this last week, and has had good nights: that is why I have been able to stay at the castle. It is seldom that her rheumatism is so bad at this season, poor dear mother!'

'Ought she not to go to some German baths for it?' inquired Marguerite.

'Yes, she ought; and I hope some day to be able to take her to Aix-la-Chapelle. Some day sounds vague,' Narka added, in answer to a look in Marguerite's face; 'but we are

waiting for a legacy that is to come to us from an old relative of mother's. I have never seen him, so it is not very wicked of me to look forward to enjoy his money—is it? And the doctor assures me Aix would do wonders for my mother.'

'And then you will come on and spend the autumn at Beaucrillon, and the winter in Paris.'

'That would be a charming programme,' said Narka, smiling; 'but mother has a great desire to spend a month in Munich, her native place, and then to make a little tour in Germany; and I don't know whether the legacy would admit of all that and a journey to France; though, with our simple habits, a little money goes a long way.'

Marguerite had lost sight of this fact in Narka's position, that she and her mother were very poor, dependent almost wholly on the generosity of the Zorokoffs, who had given them a cottage and a large garden.

'But you have travelled already?' Marguerite said.

'I have been to St. Petersburg several times with the Princess; we spent some winters there, and had masters. It was there chiefly that I learned singing. The Princess had me taught by a great Italian master from Rome. What a delightful man he was, and how I did enjoy his lessons! We used to go twice a week to the opera. Your aunt was so good to me! She was an angel, the Princess. I used to be so sorry she was not Russian.'

Marguerite smiled.

'I hope you will come soon to France and stay with us,' she said. 'I do so long to convert you!'

'That would be a cruel trick to play me. I should be either sent to Siberia, or put into a dungeon for the rest of my life.'

'Oh! I did not mean a religious conversion; I meant to convert you to being a little more French and a little less Russian. They would not put you in prison for that?'

'No, they would not put me in prison for that. But ought you not to be satisfied with

having converted Sibyl? Don't you think she is a very creditable convert?'

'Well, yes, on the whole; but she has many heresies still. She maintains, for instance, that the climate here is better than in France; that she never felt the cold in St. Petersburg as she does in Paris. She also clings to the belief that a paternal Muscovite government is the best in the world. There is only one point on which her conversion is entirely satisfactory: she admits that French husbands are perfection. Would it be hopeless to try to convert you to that belief, Narka?'

'Quite!'—spoken very emphatically.

'How heartily you say that! I don't wonder you owe a grudge to the race for having stolen away Sibyl. What a loss she must have been to you!'

'Not to me only; her departure left all these poor people'—glancing round over the country—'at the mercy of the Jews and the bureaucrats, who prey on them like wolves.'

'But doesn't the Prince and Basil protect them?'

'Basil does what he can; but he has not much power. As to the Prince, he is nearly always at St. Petersburg, looking after the future. Meanwhile the Stanovoï, who is a grasping, cruel man, has it all his own way; he and Larchoff are in league—a pair of devils!'

'The Prince must be a very odd man,' Marguerite said, looking confidential; 'my maid tells me stories about his goings-on when he is here that would make one think he was stark, staring mad.'

Narka laughed.

'I dare say he would be locked up as a lunatic in any country except Russia; but his madness is harmless enough—more so, indeed, than his saneness. He keeps everybody in commotion day and night while he is here. He never goes to bed, or undresses, at night; he smokes and drops asleep in a chair, sitting bolt-upright; every now and then he falls off his chair and bangs himself on the

ground; and then he starts up, seizes his gun, that is always beside him, rushes to the window, and fires out at the night. He does this four times, rushing to the four sides of the house as fast as he can go, and throwing open the windows with as much noise as he can make. Sibyl and Basil had the greatest difficulty to prevent him doing it this last time; they said you would all be so frightened, and they should not know what to say to you to explain it.'

Marguerite's eyes grew round with amazement. 'And was that why the Prince ran away in such a hurry?'

'Probably that had something to do with his flight. He says he can never sleep a night through here without exercising himself in firearms, and he pretends it is protection to the village against wolves and Larchoff.'

'He certainly would pass for a lunatic in France,' said Marguerite, her face breaking into dimples of communicative laughter. 'And used he to go on in that way when Aunt Isabelle was alive?'

'Not so badly. She kept him in order. He gave her his word once that he would not fire at the stars for a month; one night, however, he jumped out of bed and emptied his revolver through the window as fast as he could shoot. The Princess rushed in, and caught him in the act; but he declared he had been asleep and dreaming, and had no intention of breaking his word, and begged her pardon, and went back to bed. Presently she and all of us heard a noise from downstairs of some one howling in pain. We all rushed out to see what was the matter, and there in the middle of the hall was the Prince whipping himself with all his might, and roaring like a bull. He said he could not go to sleep with remorse for having broken his word, and felt he must get up and whip himself, as he would have had one of the servants whipped for offending in the same way. The Princess besought him to stop, but he would not; he went on whipping and yelling till he had given himself the number of stripes he thought proper, and

then he went up to bed; his back was scarred with welts, and hurt him for days.'

Marguerite was seized with such an immoderate fit of laughter that she had to rein in her horse, and go at a foot-pace. 'Why, he is as mad as any maniac in Charenton!' she exclaimed, when she was able to speak.

'He is a little eccentric,' said Narka; 'but his eccentricities are all very harmless. The Princess kept them within bounds, and so did Sibyl in a lesser degree.'

'I don't wonder you miss Sibyl.'

They cantered on a little way without speaking.

'There is one good thing that has come to me out of Sibyl's departure,' Narka resumed; 'it has led to mother's and my living in the village. This I count a great blessing. You can't get really to sympathize with the sufferings of people, and help them, until you come close enough to share them; we never realize them so long as we are in a fool's paradise of luxury and ease. The pain of poverty is like every other pain; nothing but personal ex-

perience can make us understand it, and teach us the kind of relief it wants. It is like a man born in the tropics trying to realize cold from a description in a book. He never could do it. No description could give him the physical sensation of feet and hands tingling and perishing, of blood chilled in his veins, of eyes blinded and smarting in a bitter north wind; he must leave the tropics and go up into a Northern climate to know what it all means. Now, to live in a great palace amidst luxury and abundance of every sort is like living in the tropics. I never realized what our wretched peasants had to endure until I came to live amongst them in the village, and saw how they suffer in every way—from poverty, from the climate, from ignorance; above all, from the cruelty of the Government officials.'

'But is there no redress against that? Is there no justice to be had for them?'

'Father Christopher keeps telling them they will get redress in the next world.'

'Even in this there are laws to protect the

weak against the strong. God has not left Himself without witnesses on the earth.'

'I wonder where His witnesses are in Russia?' Narka laughed.

'The people themselves are His witnesses; they believe and they hope in Him.'

'Then why does He confound their hope? Why does He let them be crushed and tortured and destroyed?'

'Oh, Narka, that satanic "why" is always in your mouth!'

'It is in the mouth of the people everywhere, because everywhere they are down-trodden, and oppressed, and made to suffer injustice.'

'Not in France,' protested Marguerite; 'the people are not down-trodden with us.'

'They are in Russia. And why should they be? Why does God permit it? If His justice is anywhere on earth, it ought to be everywhere—in Russia as well as in France.'

'Wrong cannot be made right in a day. We must be patient.'

'We *are* patient, heroically patient—under the wrongs and sufferings of others!' The passionate irony in Narka's voice sounded more bitter than the words themselves.

'I am sure we are trying to make the world less bad and life less hard on the poor,' said Marguerite. 'Don't you think that they have much less to suffer now than they had a thousand years ago—or even a hundred?'

'In France, I dare say, thanks to your glorious Revolution.'

'Oh, Narka! you call it glorious? That dreadful reign of terror, when the people rose up against God and murdered the King!' Marguerite felt again that vague repulsion which had made her more than once shrink away from Narka.

'The people rose against a reign of tyranny which had ended by driving them mad. Would that Russia could follow the example of France, and have her revolution!'

Marguerite was shocked at the passionate hatred expressed in Narka's tone and words;

but she remembered her father dropping on the road into exile, and her young brother dying in Siberia, and revulsion gave way to pity.

'If you ever make a revolution in Russia,' she said, 'let it be a revolution of love, not of hate.'

Narka laughed. 'And burst our chains by kissing them!'

'There is nothing love might not do if people would only believe in it,' said Marguerite; 'if only they would let it rule the world instead of hatred. If they would let it have its way, like the blessed sunshine, it would turn this world into a paradise. I wonder why people can't believe in love?'

As she threw back her head, and put this question to the winter sky, there was a light in her eyes that contrasted strikingly with the flame in Narka's—the light of love and the flame of hate—hate, just in its cause and cruelly provoked, but even in those beautiful eyes its effect was repulsive.

Narka was surprised to see what strength

of feeling lay beneath the bright, buoyant, and seemingly thoughtless happiness of the young French girl. Sibyl was right: there were slumbering forces underlying Marguerite's nature which only needed certain opportunities to develop. Narka felt this recognition forced upon her, and she would not perhaps have acknowledged that the discovery caused her something like a sense of alarm, or disappointment.

The two girls, as by tacit consent, put their horses into a canter, and rode on a long way without exchanging a word.

At last Narka said, 'We must not forget that we have to get back.' She looked at her watch, and saw that it was four o'clock.

They turned their horses' heads homeward.

In those North-eastern countries the twilight is short, and night closes in almost as suddenly as the dropping of a curtain.

When they re-entered the village of Yrakow it was growing dark; the moon had risen, and a few stars had sprung out. Just

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as the castle came in sight, the two riders were startled by shrieks that seemed to come from the forest. They pulled up their horses and stopped to listen. In a moment the groom, whom a curve in the road had hidden, came trotting up, and said something in Russian which evidently alarmed Narka. She was going to turn back, when some further information from the servant caused her to change her intention, and they rode slowly on.

'What has happened?' inquired Marguerite.

'He does not know, but he saw Sophie Gorff running from the road without anything on her head.'

'Was she running from the wolf, do you think?'

'That is not likely: the wolf would have been pursuing her.'

Narka stopped her horse again, and hesitated; but after a short parley with the groom she rode on.

'Sophie is out of harm's way now, at any

rate,' she said. 'Dmitri saw her cross the road towards her own house. What could it have been?'

Moved by lingering curiosity, they both cast a backward glance toward the forest. As they looked, they heard the report of a gun.

'Who can be shooting at this hour?' exclaimed Narka. 'It must be as black as night in the forest.'

Presently they saw the figure of a man carrying a gun emerge from the road adjoining the park.

'It is Basil, I do believe!' said Marguerite. 'I dare say it was he who frightened Sophie.' She called out and made signs with her whip; but Basil held on his way, and strode across the park without looking round.

'How stupid of him not to hear!' said Marguerite.

'Perhaps he hears, but does not want to come out of his way.'

'Is he such a boor as to do that? No Frenchman alive would be capable of any-

thing so rude!' protested Marguerite indignantly.

Narka's face positively beamed as she looked at her. 'You think Frenchmen are so much more gallant? You think the Russians are boors?'

'I think Basil is behaving like a boor, and I shall tell him so,' said Marguerite, with the prettiest show of offended dignity.

Narka gave a light laugh that sounded musically pleasant.

'I want to stop a few minutes here,' Marguerite said, as they came to the little Catholic chapel. 'Do you mind going on alone, and leaving Dmitri to hold my horse?'

'Why may I not wait and come in with you?' said Narka.

'Oh! if you don't mind.'

They both alighted and went in.

The chapel was merely an oratory attached to the house where Father Christopher lived. It had been built for him by the Princess when his office of tutor to Basil came to an

end. The Roman Catholics at Yrakow were few, and these, with others scattered through neighbouring villages on Prince Zorokoff's estates, were the only persons who profited by the old priest's ministry. His congregation was composed chiefly of foreigners—professors and servants—residing in families or living in the villages; but, small as it was, it gave him a good deal to do, owing to the distances over which it was scattered. He had to visit the sick in places a long way off, and these distant visits were one of the whips that Larchoff held over the Father's head. They afforded an outward semblance of truth to the charge of proselytizing which Larchoff was constantly threatening to bring against him, and which in Russia is regarded as a heinous crime, visited, like high treason, with the penalty of death.

The little chapel was almost dark, there being no light save the red glow of the sanctuary lamp. A few worshippers were kneeling in the shadows, waiting for Father Christopher to come into the confessional.

Marguerite knelt down at the altar-rail, and was at once absorbed in her devotions. Narka, from a *prie-dieu* a little behind, watched her with an odd mixture of admiration, envy, and satisfaction. The faith that could thus absorb a human being in an instant must be very strong—too strong to be shaken by any earthly feelings, by any mundane interests, by any promptings of passion. Narka had had a glimpse into Marguerite's nature, and that glimpse had shown her, beneath the light, childlike exterior, a woman endowed with a supernatural creed which makes the weakest creature invulnerable against self, fitting her to cope victoriously with perils against which mere natural strength is frail and faithless. How fervently the girl prayed! In the red light of the lamp above her, Narka could see her lips moving rapidly. She envied her being able to pray like that. But it was easy for Marguerite to do so; it was easy for *her* to believe in God's love, and call Him Father, and ask that His will might be done.

He *had* been a father to her, and His will had been always kind and loving. He had not tried her faith by injustice and cruel wrong; He had not confounded her hope and turned it to despair. The loss of faith in an Almighty love was perhaps the bitterest suffering which the hard ways of God and man inflicted on their helpless victims, Narka thought, as she watched the happy young French girl lifting up her heart in prayer.

They had not been many minutes in the chapel when Father Christopher entered from the sacristy, and after kneeling a moment before the tabernacle, went into the confessional.

Marguerite stood up, and whispered to Narka:

'Would there be time for me to wait and go to confession now?'

'Oh no,' Narka replied; 'it is too late. You had better come to-morrow morning. You will find him before mass.'

Marguerite assented, and they went out and rode home.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EVIL OMEN COMES TRUE.

THE family were now assembled in the drawing-room : Sibyl busy at her tapestry ; Narka sitting, with her slim white hands in her lap, waiting to pour out the tea ; Marguerite turning over the leaves of a book of old engravings with an air of excited interest ; M. de Beaucrillon deep in his newspapers ; and Basil measuring the long length of the room, slowly pacing up and down, his hands in his pockets, and a cigarette in his mouth, his handsome face clouded by an air of abstraction, almost of sadness, as if his thoughts were far away from the company grouped round the lamp.

Presently, passing near the table, he looked up, and his eyes rested on his cousin. It was a picture on which any man's eyes must have rested complacently. Marguerite's face had little claim to admiration beside Sibyl's blond loveliness and Narka's rich beauty of line and colour, nevertheless there was a charm about its irregular features that made it no contemptible rival to either. It was the very personification of youthful brightness and health; the small spirited nose was more piquant than if it had been classical, and the whole face sparkled with happiness and curiosity.

This evening all her prettiness and brightness were further enhanced by an irresistible little demi-toilet of a white gauzy material, rose-coloured ribbons in bows and loops sprouting out of the white foam as naturally as the rose-coloured flower sprouted out of the curls and coils of her glossy brown hair.

Marguerite was intent on the engravings. Suddenly, with an exclamation of dismay,

'Sibyl,' she cried, 'I have made a dreadful mistake!'

They all looked up, interested and attentive. Basil stopped in his walk to hear.

'That head-dress that I sketched and sent to Paris for will be out of keeping. I now remember it was in a portrait of Velasquez that I saw it; so fancy how it will clash with that Florentine thirteenth-century costume! What shall I do?'

'What were we all thinking about?' said Sibyl. Then, after a moment's reflection: 'Really, ma chérie,' she added, 'I don't think you need worry about it. No one here is likely to find out the anachronism. If it were in Paris——'

'That is a pretty character you are giving us,' said Basil, who had been listening with intense amusement to Marguerite's distressing confession; 'you want to make out that in Russia we are a set of barbarians and dunces?'

'Dear, I would not worry about it,' Sibyl continued, addressing herself with sympathetic

earnestness to Marguerite; 'as a head-dress it will suit you beautifully, and that is the great point. Not that I *fully* approved of your choice of the costume; you know I said I thought a Greuze would suit you better.'

'A Greuze!' exclaimed Basil, contemptuously, and he threw his hands up to the ceiling; 'trust one pretty woman for advising another to her ruin! You ought to have consulted a man, cousin; you ought to have consulted me; I would have advised you honestly, to your advantage. Since you won't be Red Riding Hood, and let me play Wolf to you, why shouldn't you go as Jezebel? or Judith?—Jezebel with a hatchet, or Judith with a drawn sword? I'll lend you one as big as yourself, and show you how to carry it. You would look superbly tragic in a Jewish turban. Or, if you like something more modern, there is Charlotte Corday——'

Marguerite seized one of Sibyl's balls of wool, took aim, and hit the scoffer right on the nose.

'Bravo! What a capital shot! If this

had been a bullet aimed at my heart, I was a dead man,' said Basil, catching the ball and weighing it in his hand. 'By the way, as you are such a shot, little cousin, why should not you go as Diana the huntress? I will teach you how to draw the bow, if you like.'

'Cousin Basil,' said Marguerite, slapping the engraving of Anne of Austria with a heavy paper-knife, and facing her tormentor, 'I can't think why I don't hate and detest you, for you aggravate me more than anybody I know.'

'That is precisely why,' said Basil.

'Why what?'

'Why you are so fond of me. It's because I aggravate you.'

'Oh!—is it? Well, just leave off aggravating, and see if I don't grow fonder and fonder of you.'

'You might grow too fond of me!' surveying her with a comical air of alarm.

She glanced up at him with a flash of mirth and mischief in her brown eyes. 'Well,' she said slowly, as if weighing con-

sequences, 'I might; but I'll risk it, if you don't mind.'

He sat down opposite to her, leaned forward, and began stroking his silken beard meditatively; this skirmishing with his pretty cousin was delightful. 'It is a desperate risk for me to run,' he remarked solemnly.

'Run it!' cried Sibyl, entering merrily into the fray; 'don't be a coward!'

'I'll tell you what,' said Marguerite, slapping Anne of Austria again with the paper-knife, 'here are three competent judges; there is Narka, an artist and a mystic; Sibyl, a superior and cultivated woman; Gaston, a philanthropist and a politician . . .'

'Heavens! what names you are giving us all!' protested M. de Beaucrillon, laying down his newspaper, and looking up in surprise.

Something in her brother's astonished face, or perhaps a twinkle in Basil's eye, recalled Marguerite to the fact that she was on slippery ground. Cutting short the appeal she was about to make to the three judges, 'I wish Gaston would tell you not to be so disagree-

able,' she said, turning away like a naughty child, and blushing as red as the flower in her hair.

'For goodness' sake don't set them fighting, or there will be no living in the house!' protested Sibyl, coming to the rescue with her subtle tact, for she saw Marguerite's embarrassment; 'and we shall want peace amongst ourselves if we are to keep any kind of order amongst our friends and relations.'

'By the way, how many are we going to be, all told—have you any idea?' asked Basil.

'About three hundred.'

'All staying in the house!' exclaimed Marguerite. 'Why! how many guest-rooms have you?'

'Seventy-five,' replied Sibyl. 'But then there is the armoury; about a hundred manage to sleep there; they did at my marriage.'

'But there are no beds in the armoury!' said Marguerite, more and more amazed.

'We don't put up beds,' responded Basil; 'people bring their own beds and pillows; that is our barbarian mode of proceeding.'

'What fun!' said Marguerite. 'It must be like camping out, with all the warriors and coats of mail mounting guard over one. I dare say the visitors enjoy it very much.'

'They seemed to do so last time, if one might judge from the noise they made,' remarked Narka, who had been silent for a long time, and was watching Marguerite with a coldly critical expression that would have frightened the girl if she had noticed it; 'they kept it up till all hours of the morning, and I got no sleep, for my room was over the encampment.'

'They did make a most infernal racket one night!' said Basil, with a boyish laugh, as if the recollection of the racket were very pleasant. 'Some madcap proposed that they should all get into the coats of mail and march out into the park like a phantom procession, and frighten the wits out of everybody. The joke was at once adopted, and they were buckling themselves into the armour, when Larchoff, who was too drunk to know what he was about, pulled off his

boot and began to hammer at some warrior's helmet. They had to fall on him, half a dozen of them, and strap him into a big suit of mail, and then bind his legs so that he had to lie quiet. He bellowed under the operation like a bull. It was awful! No wonder Narka could not sleep. I hope you won't put Larchoff in the armoury this time, Sibyl?'

'You don't mean to say that that dreadful man is invited!' Marguerite exclaimed in a tone of incredulity.

'He was not invited then,' said Sibyl; 'but he thought it would be pleasant, so he came without being asked. Larchoff ne se gêne pas.'

'I can't understand your letting him into the house at all,' said Marguerite.

'My cousin, there are many things in this country that you can't understand,' remarked Basil, with a peculiar laugh.

There were, indeed, very few things in Russian life, it seemed to Marguerite, that she could understand. The mixture of Ori-

ental magnificence and barbarous discomfort, of lavish expenditure and shabby makeshifts —letting guests bring their bedding and encamp on floors, and then setting them gold plate to eat off—these things were in their way as puzzling to her as that Prince Zorokoff should tolerate under his roof and admit to his table such a wretch as Larchoff.

M. de Beaucrillon had not been joining in the conversation—he had been deep in his newspapers ; but he had now finished them, and got up and drew a chair to the tea-table.

'Mademoiselle, I should like a cup of tea,' he said.

Narka took the teapot from the samovar, and was proceeding to pour out the tea, when the door opened, and Vasili, Basil's valet, pale and scared, stood on the threshold, and said something in Russian. It was answered by an exclamation of horror from the three who understood.

'What is the matter?' asked M. de Beaucrillon.

The man, who spoke French freely, replied :

'Count Larchoff has been murdered!'

For a moment, horror seemed to have rendered everyone speechless; then they plied Vasili with questions. His story was short :

Two peasants had found the Count lying in the forest with a gunshot wound in his chest; they thought he was dead, and carried him to the nearest cottage; he regained consciousness, and tried hard to say something, but no one could understand. At last they distinguished the words, 'Forgive! forgive! . . . Father Christopher! . . .' They thought he wanted to confess, and some one ran for Father Christopher, while two others fetched the doctor and the pope. Father Christopher was nearest; he was in the confessional when the message came, and rushed out just as he was. When he got to the cottage, Larchoff was still breathing. By the time the pope arrived it was all over.

'Who brought this news?' asked Basil.

'Paul, the cobbler.'

'And at what time is it supposed the murder was committed?'

'About sundown. The Count was found at eight o'clock, and the doctor said the wound must have bled for three or four hours.'

'Oh, Narka!' cried Marguerite, turning a shade paler, 'that must have been the shot we heard!'

She stopped short, terrified by the expression on Narka's face; and glancing involuntarily toward Basil, she read an answering horror in his eyes.

Sibyl and Gaston, who were trying to elicit further details from Vasili, had noticed nothing; but a sudden noise made them look quickly round.

Marguerite had fainted. She fell forward, and must have fallen to the ground if Basil had not caught her in his arms.

'Poor child! No wonder she is overcome!' Sibyl exclaimed, rushing to assist.

Basil carried the fainting girl to a divan, and laid her gently down.

'You had better go away, both of you, and leave her to us,' Sibyl said. 'It will be nothing.'

The two gentlemen saw they could be of no use, and went away, Gaston too much excited by the awful event which had caused Marguerite's swoon to attach much importance to so natural an accident.

The swoon lasted nearly an hour, in spite of Sibyl's incessant application of restoratives, and Narka's constant friction of Marguerite's hands and feet.

When at last Marguerite opened her eyes and gave signs of returning consciousness, Narka said :

'We had better let her sit up now. Bring a cushion from the red sofa—a big one.' Then, Sibyl having moved away, she bent over Marguerite, and said in a whisper, 'Don't let idle fears disturb you, dear. Keep perfect silence for a while.'

She raised her to a sitting position, Sibyl

propped her up tenderly, and then, at Narka's suggestion, they left her to recover herself.

Meantime, Basil and Gaston had gone round to the servants' hall to see Paul the cobbler, and hear the ghastly story over again.

'Let us go down to the village and see Father Christopher,' said Gaston, when Paul had confirmed the few details given by Vasili; 'we shall hear if anyone is suspected of the murder, and if Larchoff was really conscious when the Father saw him.'

Basil seemed reluctant; he urged that the Father could not possibly have any more to tell than they had already heard. Gaston, however, was bent on it; so they went. It was a beautiful starlight night, but as a matter of course a number of servants lighted lanterns as if it had been pitch-dark, and accompanied the two gentlemen. M. de Beaucrillon would have liked to talk with them, to hear what they thought about the crime—whether their instinct or information pointed with any suspicion to the murderer;

but he could not speak Russian, and none of them spoke French, and Basil seemed too stunned to be willing to play the interpreter; he let his companion keep up a monologue without uttering a word.

'I suppose these crimes are not frequent in the rural districts in Russia? The people in their hearts cannot be sorry to be rid of such a devil, and yet I dare say they will not try to screen the murderer from the police? The Russian police are wonderfully clever, I believe, but one only hears of them as political agents,' etc.

Basil never opened his lips to any of these obviously interrogative remarks; but when Gaston said something about the probable difficulty of finding direct evidence to bring the criminal to justice, he retorted, with sudden vehemence:

'Justice! They will call the bullet that struck down Larchoff justice! The man who fired it will not be a criminal in the eyes of any man, or woman either, in the country for a hundred miles round. They won't call the

deed murder ; they will call it God's justice overtaking the wicked.'

M. de Beaucrillon had not expected to see Basil moved by any feeling of pity for the wretched man whose hands had been a scourge and a sword dealing pain and death unmercifully to his people, but it shocked him a little to hear Sibyl's brother speak in a tone of almost triumphant approval of the bloody deed itself. He made no further comment, and they walked on in silence to Father Christopher's door.

The old priest had just returned from the dead man's house ; he was the only person who had accompanied the body thither from the peasant's cottage where it had first been carried. No one else was willing to pay that tribute of respect to Larchoff.

'You have heard the news?' said the Father.

'Was he conscious when you got there, Father?' inquired M. de Beaucrillon.

'I think he was ; I hope he was. I questioned him, and made an act of faith and

contrition, and he pressed my hand very distinctly, and made convulsive efforts to speak. It was awful to see. I pronounced the absolution over him conditionally.'

Basil gave a short, explosive laugh, that sounded horrible in Gaston's ears. Father Christopher winced perceptibly; he pulled his beretta forward, then pushed it back.

'Is anyone suspected of the murder?' inquired Gaston.

'They are saying it was accidental. The forest has been full of men on the look-out for the wolf, and they think that Larchoff may have been shot by one of them in mistake.'

'Is that likely?' asked M. de Beaucrillon.

'It is possible.'

There was a pause. 'Only this morning,' said Father Christopher, breaking it, 'the unfortunate man met me, and threatened to send me to Siberia for proselytizing. He had begun by telling me of the escape he had had of being killed by the wolf, riding home last night—how he had fired and hit

him just in time. I didn't believe him. Perhaps he was speaking the truth.'

'If so, it was the first time it ever happened to him,' said Basil.

'Well, he has gone before the judgment-seat,' said the Father. 'May God have mercy on him!'

'Mercy on Larchoff! The devil owes him some, for he did his work well.'

Basil's handsome features were positively ugly with the expression of hatred that passed over them. Father Christopher had never seen such an expression on his face before. It suddenly occurred to him that Sibyl had more than once expressed uneasy suspicions about her brother having been lured into associations of some sort with men who made crime and vengeance a part of their political creed. Father Christopher had never attached much importance to these fears; he believed that Basil was incapable of practically committing himself to such dark theories, though he might, partly from instinctive hatred of the cruelties that had provoked

them, partly from a spirit of opposition, talk as if he sympathized with them. If the Father had been alone with Basil he would have challenged him then and there, and insisted on knowing the truth; for though his old pupil was now a man of four-and-twenty, Father Christopher still looked upon him as a boy, and spoke to him with the frank boldness of a master.

'The village is in a state of great excitement,' he remarked, wishing to divert M. de Beaucrillon's attention from Basil's strange demeanour; 'there will be little sleep in it to-night.'

'I will go down and see Ivan Gorff,' said Basil.

'You won't find him,' said Father Christopher; 'he rode into X. this afternoon, and he had not returned an hour ago. That zealous gossip, Paul, went there to tell of the murder, and he heard that Mdlle. Sophie was ill; the shock of the news brought on a nervous attack.'

'No wonder,' said M. de Beaucrillon; 'my

sister fainted when she heard of it. We left her insensible when we came away.'

They wished Father Christopher good-night, and went back to the castle.

CHAPTER V.

WHO FIRED THE SHOT?

MARGUERITE was very ill during the night. In the morning she sent to say she would not come down to breakfast. Sibyl went at once to her room.

'My poor darling,' she said, laying her cool cheek against Marguerite's hot face, 'to think of our bringing you all this way to frighten you into illness with wolves and murders!'

Marguerite answered with a faint smile, and Sibyl, seeing that the girl was very nervous, and best left quiet and alone, kissed her and came away, and sent for the doctor.

Narka had gone out early to see her mother, who was sure to have heard of the murder, and likely, in her weak state of health, to be seriously affected by the shock.

Madame Larik was, in truth, greatly excited. 'So God's vengeance has overtaken the man who murdered my husband and my boy!' she exclaimed, her face quivering. 'Ah! the Lord God swore to avenge the widow and the orphan; the Lord God has kept His word!'

'The vengeance can't help us, or give back the dead,' replied Narka. 'Don't rejoice in it, mother; it can't help us.'

But Madame Larik was not magnanimous enough to take this negative view of the event. She was a kindly soul; she would not have crushed a worm; but she was a deeply wronged woman, made a widow and sonless by Larchoff and his father, and it was not in human nature that she should not feel a thrill of satisfaction at this deed of vengeance wrought upon the enemy who had crushed the joy out of her life.

Narka let her talk on awhile, but seeing

that she was exciting herself overmuch, she said, irrelevantly: 'Marguerite wanted to come and see you yesterday; do you think you would be able to see her to-day?'

'No, no; not to-day. My pains are sure to be very bad to-day. You know they are always worse when my mind is worried.'

'I thought it might help you to forget the pains and the worry a minute. She is very merry and pleasant, and very nice to me.'

'In a few days, when I have got over it a bit, but not to-day, not to-day. I can't think how you could ask me such an unreasonable thing, Narka, as to see a stranger to-day.'

'Then I shall make her wait, little mother; there is no hurry,' said Narka soothingly; and she arranged the pillows, and fussed about the nervous, irritable invalid, and talked of household matters, and did what she could to cheer her and turn her mind to practical interests. Narka was not the same being with her mother and with the rest of the world; every tone, every touch,

was full of deprecating tenderness; her strength became as the weakness of a little child when she was nursing and caressing and humouring the peevish, loving, broken-spirited widow who had only her left to care for. When M. de Beaucrillon said to Sibyl, 'Your Narka is too grand and cold for me; she is not human enough; she is like a goddess made out of marble and gold,' Sibyl replied, 'If you saw her with her mother you would not say that.'

They were at breakfast when Narka got back to the castle. She had scarcely sat down when a servant came in to say that Pakol Pasgoiroiwitch, the Stanovoï's clerk, was outside, wanting to speak to Prince Basil.

'Let the dog wait,' was Basil's contemptuous reply. 'Does he think I am going to get up from my breakfast to attend to him?'

The servant looked as if he had something he wished to say—something that would explain; but after a second's hesitation he

decided not to say it, and withdrew. He had hardly closed the door when Basil rose impulsively and went out after him. Pakol Pasgoiroiwitch was standing in the hall; the door was ajar, and the voices were audible in the breakfast-room. Some words reached Sibyl and Narka which made them change colour and start. Before they had time to exchange a word, Basil flung the door open and came back, followed by Pakol Pasgoiroiwitch.

Basil looked at the man as if ordering him to speak.

'The murderer has been discovered,' said Pakol Pasgoiroiwitch, with a stolid, neutral face like a mask.

An exclamation of impatient curiosity came from the two ladies.

'Father Christopher is the man who committed it!'

Sibyl almost screamed, and after staring blankly at the messenger, dropped into her seat. Narka stood as if turned to stone.

'What is it?' inquired M. de Beaucrillon, curious and alarmed.

Basil explained. The man went on to deliver his message, looking all the while as unmoved as a wooden figure might have done: information had reached the authorities that morning; the Father's gun was found loaded in the sacristy, with one chamber empty; the Father had been seen hurrying from the forest at the time of the murder—all this evidence was substantiated.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed M. de Beaucrillon, when it had been translated to him; 'but you could not hang a dog on such evidence?'

'Not in France,' retorted Basil; 'but we are in Russia, and the Stanovoï thinks Father Christopher is guilty.'

'He thinks? It's his business to think everybody guilty till he finds out who is. Why doesn't he suspect you and me? He would find both our rifles with a couple of chambers empty. Bon Dieu! The thing is beyond belief; it is monstrous!'

'*Father Christopher!*' Sibyl repeated slowly, in a tone of stupefied amazement.

'Have they arrested him?' asked Narka, who still stood rooted to the spot where she heard the news.

'Yes; about an hour ago.'

'You can go,' said Basil, with haughty abruptness.

The man bowed to his knees, and withdrew.

Everybody seemed struck dumb for a moment after the door had closed. Then Basil exploded in a muttered curse, and walked to the window.

'What motive can anyone have had in getting up such a preposterous story?' asked M. de Beaucrillon.

'Oh! the motive is not far to seek,' said Sibyl; 'the Father is hated by the Stanovoï, as he was by Larchoff; both have been pursuing him unrelentingly ever since my mother's death, trying to entrap him into something that would give them a hold upon him; they have plotted late and early to convict him of proselytizing, of being connected with the revolutionists. It was only

the fear of my father's influence at St. Petersburg that held them at all in check, or they would have sent him to Siberia or the gallows long since. The Stanovoï has seized on Larchoff's murder now to serve his hate of the Father, and they will buy witnesses to swear to his guilt.'

'We will outbid them; we will do it if it costs every rouble in our possession and every acre of our land!' cried Basil, coming up to her, both his hands clenched, his countenance set.

'If papa were at home!' exclaimed Sibyl excitedly.

'Thank heaven he is not!' retorted Basil; 'he will serve us infinitely better at St. Petersburg. I must go to him immediately. We will do what is to be done there, and then my father will come home and deal with the business here.'

'Dear Basil! that is the best plan. But meantime they will have carried Father Christopher to prison at X. Do you think the Stanovoï will let you see him at the

guard-house before he goes? It would be everything if you could see him and tell him to be of good cheer.'

'Father Christopher is sure to be that, whatever befalls. I don't think they would let me see him.'

'Oh, try, Basil, try!' said Narka, in a tone of entreaty that was full of anguish. 'Or if I went? Perhaps they would make less difficulty about letting me in?'

Basil seemed pulled in different directions. After a moment's hesitation he said:

'I will go myself,' and went out of the room.

'Would my going help?' asked M. de Beaucrillon.

'No; it would hinder, more likely,' said Sibyl. 'Oh, Narka!' she cried, moving rapidly to and fro and wringing her hands, 'if they should find witnesses to swear away his life!'

'They will find them,' Narka replied, in a level undertone.

Sibyl knew what a strength of passionate

feeling there was beneath the tense, calm manner; but M. de Beaucrillon did not, and the girl's apparent insensibility revolted him.

The Stanovoï politely but positively refused to let Basil see the Father. He was profuse in his expressions of regret at not being able to obey his Excellency's desire; but he had himself received the strictest orders not to let anyone near the prisoner, who was to be conveyed next day to X.

'And who has invented this precious lie against him?'

'Prince, I am here again under orders of secrecy, and dare not reveal the names of the witnesses.'

'There are several, then? I should not have thought there was one man in the entire district who would have lied against Father Christopher.'

'There is not a man in the district, Excellency, who does not know that Father Christopher hated Count Larchoff.'

'There is not a man, woman, or child in the district who did not hate Larchoff! If

that be a proof, you can convict every moujik on the land of the murder.'

'We can't convict them of a more heinous crime still, that of poisoning the souls of the Czar's subjects by drawing them away from the orthodox faith, as Father Christopher has been of late years repeatedly charged with doing.'

'By whom was he charged with it? By Larchoff, who never could prove it in a single instance!'

'It will be proved now.'

'What! Is Larchoff coming back from hell to do it? Mind what you are about! I warn you, the devil may overshoot his mark.'

With this threat, emphasized by his uplifted stick, Basil turned his back on the Stanovoï, and walked out.

Ivan Gorff had seen him in the distance, and was waiting for him outside the mayor's house. They clasped hands.

'This is a pretty business,' said Ivan.

'Whose doing can it be?' asked Basil, as if questioning himself.

'You don't believe it can have been accidental?'

'I mean this arrest of Father Christopher.'

'The Stanovoï's, of course. Who else had any interest in getting him out of the way? But the Prince will be too strong for him. There is no likelihood of their prevailing against the Prince?'

'There's always a likelihood of lies prevailing.'

They went on some way without further speech. Ivan saw that Basil was thoroughly alarmed, and, though he thought he overestimated the danger to Father Christopher, he knew his friend too well to say so, at this crisis at least. Basil was by nature and habit masterful and impatient of opposition; to contradict him would only serve to exasperate his imperious temper, and provoke one of those outbursts of violence which betrayed the weak point in his character—the lack of that strength which controls self, and is the surest test of power to control others.

So Ivan walked on, his loose, shuffling

step keeping pace irregularly with the vigorous stride of his companion. When they reached the park gate, he stood.

'I won't go in with you,' he said; 'I have to go on to X. this afternoon. Sophie is very ill.'

'Oh! I'm very sorry to hear that,' said Basil cordially. 'I hope it's only the effect of the shock to her nerves?'

'The doctor says so; but he says she is on the brink of a nervous fever. I must take her for a change as soon as possible. I think I shall carry her off to Odessa in a day or two; we have an old aunt there who will take care of her. She wants to be taken care of.'

'She does,' replied Basil. 'They all do, those young girls; they ought all to have mothers to look after them. Well, present my best respects to Mademoiselle Sophie in case she may have left before I return. By the way, I did not tell you; I am going to start off to St. Petersburg. Nobody must know; I will say I am going to the dentist at X.,

and that I may be obliged to stay the night there. This will give me forty-eight hours' start of the blood-hounds, and a good deal depends on our being first in the field at St. Petersburg. It is a mercy my father has kept his footing at Court. We have grumbled because he squandered so much money there, but now we may be thankful for it.'

'Yes, it is an ill wind that blows nobody good,' replied Ivan.

CHAPTER VI.

'IT IS NO MURDER IN THE SIGHT OF GOD.'

THE doctor found Marguerite alarmingly feverish ; she seemed on the brink of a serious illness; for some days he could not say how it would turn. Narka longed to take possession of her, to be quite alone with her. If delirium came on, there was the danger of revelations which both she and Marguerite dreaded. The consciousness of a secret between them —a terrible fear, which, for being unexpressed, was none the less distinctly understood by both—had suddenly drawn the two girls together in a bond of no common sympathy, and Marguerite would have been

happier to feel herself in Narka's safe keeping; but Sibyl had at once entered on the duties of nurse as hers by right, and remained constantly by her bedside.

Narka had not been alone with Basil for a moment since the announcement of the murder, and she had not even seen him since the news of Father Christopher's arrest. Of late, her relationship with Basil had been undergoing a change. Imperceptibly the old free unconsciousness had been slipping from her, and she had felt creeping over her that kind of embarrassing sensitiveness which manifests itself in shyness; she felt, or she fancied, that her manner was not the same—free, direct, and simple; and the dread that Basil should notice the change made her shrink from being alone with him. But Basil noticed nothing. He was as unrestrained as ever in his brotherly familiarity. It had long been his habit to make a confidante—to a certain point—of Narka. He talked to her more unreservedly than to anyone else. He could denounce things to

her, he could swear at the Czar, he could complain of his father's extravagance and absenteeism more freely than to Sibyl ; he had been thrown entirely on Narka for this kind of sympathy since Sibyl's marriage, and he had been annoyed lately at the difficulty he found in getting hold of her for confidential talks ; she seemed to be always taken up with Sibyl, busy about something; it never occurred to him that she was fighting shy of him.

This morning Narka had been wanting to meet him ; she dreaded the interview, and yet some force was impelling her to seek it. She felt that she and Basil were in closer affinity at this moment than they had ever been before—drawn into closer confidence than they had ever been in childhood, when every little joy and sorrow was common, when they bent over the same lessons, and conned the same story, and wandered together through the forest, bird-nesting; whatever spell might come between them, it was to her that Basil was looking now for sympathy, and that silent understanding which was as

necessary to his morbid sensitiveness as food to his body. She had been up and down stairs a dozen times within an hour, now fancying that she heard his steps ringing across the hall, then that she heard the door of his room close or open; her heart leaped every time she thought he was going to appear, and sank again when the hope, or the dread, she could hardly say which, died away. She was crossing the broad landing at the head of the wide oaken stairs when Basil did finally appear in the hall below, and, seeing her, turned from his purpose of entering the drawing-room, and bounded up the stairs.

'It was just you that I wanted to see,' he said; 'come in here a minute.' He opened the door of his room, the room he was pleased to call his study, and Narka went in with him. He closed the door, and then turned to her. 'What is the matter with Marguerite?' he asked.

Narka could hardly believe her ears: the question was like a glass of cold water dashed into her face.

'The doctor says her nerves have received a shock.'

'We did not want him to tell us th at, Basil retorted impatiently. 'Does he say it is likely to be serious?'

'He hopes not; but she must be kept very quiet. Sibyl is with her.'

Basil turned brusquely away, and walked to the window.

So this was what was uppermost in *his* thoughts, this was *his* paramount preoccupation when they were all waiting with bated breath to know the fate of Father Christopher, charged with a crime that was punishable by death!

Basil came back as brusquely as he had turned away.

'Narka, there is no time to be lost. I am going to start at once for St. Petersburg. No one must know it except ourselves. Ivan is the only person I have told.'

'Ah! . . . . Ivan is sure to be discreet,' said Narka, with an imperceptible note of interrogation in her voice.

'Ivan discreet? Where I am concerned? Ivan would be flayed alive to save me from a toothache. You and Sibyl don't do Ivan justice; he is the best fellow living. I wish you would both try and like him better.'

'We do like him,' said Narka; 'and I know he is devoted to you; but when secrecy is such a matter of life and death one dreads the very grass hearing. . . . I did not mean to doubt his loyalty. What hour do you leave? Have you ordered the britzska?'

'No. I will make Vasili pack up what I want to take with me, and then order it.' He put out his hand to the bell.

'Don't ring,' said Narka, arresting him; 'I will put up your things.'

The door of his bedroom adjoined his study, and stood open; she passed in, and proceeded with sisterly indiscretion to open the drawers and fill the travelling-valise that was always ready at hand for these sudden emergencies. Departures for distant journeys at a moment's notice were such common

incidents in Basil's practice that his present expedition would probably have excited no surprise either in the castle or the village; it was conscience that was making a coward of him. He made no demur to Narka's offer, but went to his writing-table and began putting away and destroying some letters and papers.

Presently he came into the bedroom, and, standing over Narka who was on her knees labouring at the valise, he said:

'You were down in the village this morning; what do they say? Do they think it was an accident?'

'No, they don't,' she answered, without looking up.

'Do they suspect who did it?'

'I did not hear; but if they knew, the secret would be safe with them.'

'What! even if they believed it to have been deliberate murder?'

'They don't call it murder, I imagine. They had come to look on Larchoff as more dangerous than any wild beast; his death is

no more a murder to them than the killing of a wolf, or a man-eating bear.'

After a silence Basil said, 'And you agree with them?'

Narka did not answer at once; she finished what she was doing, and then stood up. 'And if I did agree with them?' she said, her blue-black eyes flashing with the passion that vibrated in her voice—'if I did agree with them? Do you expect *me* to call down vengeance on the man who rid the world of Larchoff? If you do, you expect more than God in heaven expects of me!'

Basil positively quailed before the strength of passion that was making her tremble; yet he could not look away, or even drop his lids: her eyes held him with an irresistible fascination, and compelled his to meet them.

'You would acquit the man who committed the murder?' he asked.

'I would; I do. It is no murder in the sight of God.'

'Would you'—his voice dropped almost to

a whisper—'can you fancy a woman marrying the man who did it ?'

'If she had loved him before, why not ?'

'You think he might marry her, then, without confessing that he had done it ?'

'That would be harder to forgive ; but if he loved her he would trust her love, and not fear to tell her the truth beforehand.' Her voice had grown suddenly tremulous and soft as a caress.

Both were silent. There was a troubled consciousness in his eyes ; in hers a wistful questioning. Basil was going to speak, but he checked himself and turned away. A few minutes later he was on the road to X.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LEGACY.

NARKA contrived to get possession of Marguerite next day. She owed this less perhaps to her own manœuvring, than to the fact that M. de Beaucrillon was bored to such an extent that it took all Sibyl's time and ability to keep him quiet; she was almost sorry that Marguerite was not ill enough to frighten him a little; this would have been a stimulant, and kept him at least from yawning all day long. But, unfortunately for Sibyl, he shrewdly suspected, what the doctor had said, that the best thing for Marguerite would be to carry her back at once to France. Poor Sibyl, with her

hands full, had no time to spare in diverting him, but she contrived to make her many occupations help a little in that direction. There were scores of letters to be written; invited guests had to be put off, and all the preparations for the intended festivities to be countermanded, not temporarily, as she had thought when the murder had thrown a bomb-shell into the gay programme, but definitely. She begged Gaston to help her whenever French would do instead of Russian, and he was too well bred not to oblige a lady, though she was his wife. But these little services were as pebbles thrown into the water: they stirred its surface for a moment, but the ripples passed away, and left it as dead a calm as before.

'Ma chère amie,' he protested, 'the dulness of your native land is sublime. In no other country under heaven do people yawn as they do in Russia. The ennui is beyond any name in any language. I feel as if I were being chloroformed.'

'Dear! oh dear! what an unreasonable

being a man is!' Sibyl replied, with a sigh of despair. 'In three weeks you have had a wolf come down and howl for you, then a murder, and you complain of being chloroformed!'

'These shocks wake one up with a start, but they don't keep one awake. There is absolutely nothing to do. If there were even a neighbour with a pretty wife to make love to! That would be wrong? Well, at any rate, it would be amusing; but I can't even try to make you jealous. Seigneur Dieu! what a country!'

Sibyl admitted it was a hard case, but she appealed to his generosity, his kindness, to all his virtues in turn, and adjured him to be patient.

'I wish Basil had thought of taking Gaston with him,' she said to Narka the third morning after her brother's departure. 'It would have amused him to see St. Petersburg, and what a relief it would have been to us!'

'I should not care to give M. de Beaucrillon such an opportunity of comparing our criminal law with that of his own country,'

said Narka ; ' but now that you are a French-woman you are not so sensitive in that respect as when you were a Russian.'

' I wish, Narka, you would call Gaston by his Christian name,' said Sibyl, with clever irrelevance ; ' it sounds ridiculous to hear you saying " Monsieur de Beaucrillon." If you had a husband I should call him by his name, and expect him to call me by mine.'

Narka's face beamed with one of her rare beautiful smiles. She looked at Sibyl with a glance of adoring admiration.

' Yes,' continued Sibyl, with a pretty pout, ' you are a disappointment to me, both of you—a most unsatisfactory pair of brother and sister.'

The grace of the reproach was one of those delicate touches with which Sibyl was continually thrilling Narka's tenderness to the heart. Yet these touches in some indescribable way brought home to her, as no external conditions of rank could do, the wide gulf which the accident of birth and race had sunk between them, and which Sibyl, with

instinctive delicacy, bridged over, always seeming unconscious of any social difference between herself and her low-born sister.

During these days of dreary ennui to Gaston and breathless anxiety to the other members of the family, Narka was on the watch to avoid being alone with Sibyl. Her own constant attendance on Marguerite and Sibyl's multitude of occupations made this comparatively easy, but occasionally they were thrown together *en tête-à-tête* for a little while, and then, let Narka do what she would, the conversation fell on the murder. Sibyl would not admit for a moment that the crime could be fastened on Father Christopher.

'I wonder what Ivan Gorff thinks about it?' she said one morning when M. de Beaucrillon had left the breakfast-table; 'he ought to be back now. I wonder how Sophie is. I am sorry he carried her off in such a hurry, without letting us know she was so ill. I should have liked to see her; but I fancy they have been both a little shy with us all here since that kind of overture of my father's

about Sophie which Basil did not follow up. It was a mistake his speaking so soon. Not that I think there was really much likelihood of Basil ever making up his mind to ask Sophie. What a mercy my father is on the spot to work against the people here! We shall never complain again of his being such an absentee. It is all-important now his being in favour at Court.'

'Yes; if that obtains justice for Father Christopher, we need never complain,' assented Narka; 'but, Sibyl, what a heinous thing it is that the life of an innocent man should hang on such a chance!'

'It is never a chance when we can reach the Emperor,' Sibyl replied; 'that is the happiness of being under one whose authority is supreme; there is no twisting of the law, no plotting or bribing, that can overrule his will.'

'But if one can't reach him in time, what redress is there against the plotting and the bribing!'

Sibyl remembered how bitterly Narka had

learned this evil side of the Emperor's paternal Government, and regretted her inconsiderate remark.

M. de Beaucrillon's entrance was opportune to them both. Narka left him to Sibyl, and went up to Marguerite. The feverish symptoms had entirely disappeared, but bright little Marguerite was as weak as a child, and looked more wan and worn than so short an illness seemed to justify. The few days' suffering had beautified her, as such accidents are apt to do in early youth; her complexion was as clear as wax, and her brown eyes had borrowed a soft lustre that was more fascinating in its way than their usual saucy brightness. Poor child! no wonder the brightness was veiled! those innocent eyes had been gazing through wide-open summer windows at the joyous pageant of life, and lo! there suddenly passed before her a spectacle of horror, a vision of sin and murder.

Narka continued to devote herself to her, though there was now no necessity for

constant attendance. No confidences had passed between them, but she felt that Marguerite was clinging to her as the sinking man clings to the swimmer.

'Sibyl was saying she thought you might venture on a little drive to-day, dear,' remarked Narka.

'Oh, no; I don't feel up to it,' Marguerite replied; 'my head swims when I walk across the room; to-morrow perhaps I shall feel inclined, but not to-day.'

Narka stood looking down at the small figure reclining on the couch; it looked half as small again, swallowed up under an enormous fur rug.

'I will let you have your way about it this once more,' she said; 'but it is the last time. To-morrow, if you won't come of your own sweet will, I will get M. de Beaucrillon to carry you. You will never get a bit of strength, or a patch of colour into your cheeks, until you get some fresh air.'

'The colour will come back soon enough, don't be afraid,' Marguerite said, with a little

pretence at cheerfulness. 'Are you going to drive?'

'No; I am going to walk; I am going down to my mother for an hour.'

'That dear Tante Nathalie; when shall I see her?' said Marguerite, taking Narka's hand that hung down by her side. 'How good it is of her to spare you to us so long! You have been nursing me when you ought to have been with her. How she must miss you!'

'Dear mother!'—Narka's eyes grew tender in an instant—'but she is glad to let me be with Sibyl.'

'You do love Sibyl?'

'Yes, I do love Sibyl!' Narka answered, with hearty emphasis.

Marguerite felt at that moment that she loved Narka. Something in the expression of her uplifted face, perhaps, expressed this avowal, for Narka bent down and kissed her on the forehead, and then left the room.

At the park gate she met Ivan Gorff.

'I thought you were gone to Odessa!' she exclaimed in surprise.

'I have come back on purpose to see you. I have something of importance to tell you.'

'Ah! about the Father?'

'No; about Basil. He must escape across the frontier as quickly as possible.'

Narka stood, partly from sheer inability to go on walking, and partly that she might look at Ivan, and read in his face what she had not the courage to ask.

Ivan stood also, but he only repeated:

'He must escape at once. I have sent a messenger on the chance of meeting him at St. Petersburg, but I expect he is on his way home by this, and the messenger will miss him. Perhaps it is as well; there will be less hurry in arresting him here. They will have to be cautious, and catch him quietly.'

'What has happened?' Narka said, when she had recovered her self-command sufficiently to speak and walk on.

'Something has been found amongst Larchoff's papers that compromises him; he

is denounced as implicated in a plot to assassinate the Emperor.'

Narka uttered something inarticulate.

'I must not ask how you came by this knowledge?' she said.

'You may ask, but I may not tell,' he replied curtly.

'The warrant is not yet here for his arrest?'

'No; but it will probably be here to-night. When do you expect Basil?'

'At any moment. He has not announced the day, but I have an idea he will be back to-morrow.'

They went on a little without speaking. Then Narka said:

'And Father Christopher? Have you heard anything? Is there any chance of Basil bringing back the order for his release?'

Ivan was shuffling on with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his furred overcoat. At this question of Narka's he lifted his head, held it skyward a moment,

and then dropped it heavily on his breast; the gesture expressed absolute hopelessness.

'Yet the Prince has great influence? Sibyl seems certain he will prevail.'

But Ivan remained stolidly unresponsive, while a look as of impatient contempt crossed his face.

'Oh, surely something may be done!' Narka cried. 'Is there nothing to be attempted here? Would not the people come with us in a body to X., and petition the Isprawnic? Sibyl would come at our head. Or perhaps M. de Beaucrillon, as a foreigner, might have a chance of being heard if he interfered. To think that we should stand by and not lift a finger to rescue our dear old Father is too horrible!'

Ivan walked on, his eyes still staring before him. At last he said:

'There is only one thing that could be of the least use: if we could find the man who committed the murder, and give him up to justice.'

Narka felt as if some one had clutched her

by the throat. The ground seemed to be moving under her feet. She kept walking on as if urged by some mechanical force. For her life she could not have stopped; if she had stopped, she must have screamed. Neither of them spoke another word until they came to a point where the roads crossed. Then Narka said:

'I am going this way.'

Ivan took the remark for a dismissal, and without further ceremony parted from her, going on to the village, while she took the road to X.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LEGACY.

NARKA was no longer in a mood to go to her mother after this. It would have been impossible to keep the absolute secrecy that was necessary; she could command the silence of her tongue —that was always easy to her; but she could not insure the silence of her face, nor prevent the keen eyes of the mother from reading on its troubled features the fact that something was agitating her. Many a time within the last few days Narka had felt thankful that she was staying at the castle, and that Marguerite's illness gave her a plausible excuse for not going home to be with Madame Larik

during her little attack of rheumatism. It would have been almost beyond her powers of self-control to sit all day with a calm countenance, cheering up her mother, reassuring her perpetual apprehensions, answering her endless conjectures, contradicting her prophecies, and belying in words the terrors that filled her own heart. It would often have been a relief—at this moment an unspeakable relief—if she could have spoken out to anybody, to an idiot, to a dumb dog, to any living thing; it would have been a relief if she could have shrieked out to the trees; but she might not indulge even in this solace; there were peasants about in the fields; they would hear her, and think she had gone suddenly mad.

She walked on at a quick pace, and had gone some way on the road, when there broke on the stillness the sound of bells tinkling in the distance. She stood still and listened till she heard them nearing distinctly. Could it be Basil returning? Narka held her breath in expectation; but the suspense did not last

long. There came quickly in sight a britzska, in which she recognised the Prince's notary, M. Perrow. He pulled up the moment he saw her, and jumping out, advanced with a low bow. The bow was so low that it set Narka wondering.

'This is a lucky chance for me, mademoiselle,' said the notary, again bowing; 'I came to seek the honour of an interview with you. May I join you now, or shall I accompany you to Madame Larik's house?'

'My mother is not very well; I prefer to talk with you here,' replied Narka, her surprise increasing to amazement.

'It is not often one has the good fortune to be the bearer of good news,' began M. Perrow facetiously, 'and I congratulate myself on being so privileged.'

'Good news! Oh, thank God!' cried Narka; 'he is out? he is free?'

'Excuse me: my news has nothing to do with that sad business. I come to announce the death of your mother's respected relative, Dr. Schwartzel, and to inform you that he

has bequeathed to you, to you personally and solely, a legacy of fifty thousand roubles. The money has been paid into our hands.'

Narka said, 'Oh!' and walked on.

'We are so full of this dreadful business,' she observed presently, 'that it seems as if nothing important could happen except in connection wlth it.'

'That is natural. Still life goes on, and it is a good thing to inherit. The money was paid in only this morning by the banker of the late Dr. Schwartzel: you see, I have lost no time in letting you know.'

'I thank you.'

'It is desirable that the money should be invested without delay. The sooner it is placed, the sooner it will bring in interest. I wait your orders on this head.' And he forthwith launched into a statement of the various kinds of stock, home and foreign, that he ventured to recommend as safe and profitable.

Narka let him run on, but she hardly heard what he was saying; she was not in a frame

of mind to enter on the subject of railways that paid high with risk, and Government bonds that paid low without risk. She requested M. Perrow to let the money remain in his safe for a few days, until she should have considered the matter and taken advice, when she would communicate with him. The notary was a trifle disappointed, but he felt that Mademoiselle Narka Larik was a person who knew how to assume at once the new position in which her suddenly acquired fortune placed her, and this inspired him with additional respect for her. He took his dismissal with politeness, got into his britzska, and drove away.

Narka watched the britzska out of sight, and it almost seemed as if its coming and going had been a dream. A week ago this legacy would have been the realization of the cherished scheme of her life; it would have represented the fulfilment of all that her poor mother had longed for: independence for her child, and comfort and ease for them both. They had wanted for nothing, thanks

to Prince Zorokoff's generosity and Sibyl's loving kindness; but both mother and daughter had a spirit that chafed under the burden of such obligations, and to be free from these, to be independent of pecuniary help, was their greatest desire. Then, Narka longed to take her mother to those healing springs in her native Germany, and after that to travel and see some of the beautiful places that Basil told her about, and that her own imagination had pictured to her out of books, The tragedy of her father's and her brother's death had fallen like a blight upon her youth, and crushed the natural desire of her age for amusement. She had never shared the common delight of girlhood in innocent gaiety and dress and dancing; those springs were broken; but perhaps on that very account her desire for other enjoyments had developed more strongly. She longed to escape from the scenes of her life's great sorrow, as if this flight of the body must in some degree carry her spirit away from its pain, while the intellectual hunger of a healthy

mind incited her curiosity to visit new places and see new phases of life. The long winter evenings had many and many a time been shortened to herself and her mother by dreams and plans that were to be carried out when old cousin Schwartzel died and left them the independence he had promised on hearing of Larik's exile and their consequent destitution. And now the promise had been fulfilled, the fairy had come to their door with the purse and the seven-leagued boots, and Narka could not even feel glad. If the money could serve to rescue Father Christopher and get Basil safe out of Russia, how joyfully would she have paid it away, and renounced her day-dreams for ever!

She had walked a long way; so long that even her elastic young limbs recalled her to the fact that they had to carry her back. She made up her mind not to announce the news to Madame Larik to-day. She was not sufficiently mistress of herself to play the rejoicing part that would be expected of her; moreover, in her mother's weak condition of health,

another sudden shock, even a pleasant one, might be hurtful; and there was no hurry; the good news would be as good to-morrow. She was debating whether she would go in to her mother now, or come down later in the afternoon, when the sight of Sibyl's pony-carriage at the cottage gate settled the question, and she went in.

In Narka's eyes there was no lovelier thing in nature than the picture of Sibyl with Tante Nathalie, as Madame Larik was called in the family. When she entered the room now the young Princess was administering to the widow some little dainty that she had brought from the castle, and was playfully persuading her to eat. Madame Larik yielded under protest, querulously declaring between every spoonful that she had no appetite, and that there was no reason why she should force herself to eat, or to live at all. Sibyl petted her as if she had been a child; her manner was as full of gentle deference toward the peevish, forlorn widow as if she had been a Czarina. Madame Larik had been pretty in her youth, with that

soft round German comeliness that wears better than more regular beauty; she was a fair, fat, round little woman, with nothing to remind you of Narka's grand lines or delicate splendour of colouring; but there was no lack of intelligence in her features, and the majesty of a great sorrow had set its seal upon her.

'Tante Nathalie is a great deal better to-day,' said Sibyl, when Narka came in. 'She won't own it; but that is sheer perversity, I tell her. Now, ma tante, you must let me put you lying down,' she continued, seeing that Madame Larik had eaten the last spoonful of her little dainty meal.

'I am well enough sitting so, my dear,' said the widow.

But Sibyl insisted. She had a notion that to 'put people lying down' *must* be good for them.

Madame Larik gave in, as she always did with Princess Sibyl.

'We must get her out for a drive to-morrow,' said Sibyl, fussing fondly about

her, and putting a quilted silk eider-down—her own gift—over Tante Nathalie's feet.

'No, no,' protested Madame Larik, shaking her head; 'no driving about for me while Father Christopher is in prison. Wait till he is out.'

'Your moping and worrying won't help him to get out,' argued Sibyl.

'That is what I tell her,' said Narka, standing at the end of the sofa.

'Why does not Basil write? It is a bad sign that he does not write,' said Madame Larik; 'it must mean bad news.'

'It means more likely no news,' said Sibyl; 'but in any case he would not have trusted the news to the post; he said so.'

'If he had good news he would have managed to send it somehow,' persisted Madame Larik, in her little soft, obstinate way, shaking her head; 'good news is sure to come.'

'I thought it was bad news that always travelled fast,' Sibyl said, laughing at her. 'Why will you croak so, Tante Nathalie?'

She took a vase off the table, and began to arrange some hot-house flowers in it, talking in her pleasant, sympathetic way all the time.

Then she said she must be going, and Narka had better come with her.

Narka made no difficulty. She was thankful to escape the strain of a *tête-à-tête* with her mother.

CHAPTER IX.

BASIL'S DECLARATION.

IT was about four o'clock in the afternoon of the sixth day after Basil's departure; the lamps had just been lighted; M. de Beaucrillon, Sibyl, and Narka were in the drawing-room. Suddenly a loud barking of the dogs announced some arrival, and before there was time to conjecture who it might be, the door opened, and Basil walked in. Sibyl ran to embrace him, and the others greeted him with glad eagerness. After the excitement of the meeting was over, Sibyl said:

'And Father Christopher? Have you succeeded?'

'Yes; the warrant for his release was signed the day I left.'

An exclamation of deep thankfulness came from all.

'Did you see him on your way through X.?' asked Sibyl.

'I did. But don't let us begin to talk about that yet,' he said, letting himself fall into a chair; 'I'm too dead-beat.'

The light fell full on his face, and they were all struck by its haggard expression. The air of utter exhaustion he wore was scarcely to be accounted for, at his age, by a hurried journey to and from St. Petersburg.

Sibyl bent over him, and kissed his forehead.

'You must want some food, dear Basil,' she said. 'What shall I order? Tea?'

'Nonsense—tea!' said M. de Beaucrillon. 'Give him some strong bouillon and a bottle of good old Bordeaux.'

'That would suit my condition better,' said Basil, 'though a cup of tea would not be amiss either, if it were ready.'

'It will be ready in a moment,' said Sibyl. 'Ring the bell, Gaston.'

Then, as if too impatient to wait for the summons to be answered, she went quickly out of the room herself.

Beyond a mutual greeting when they clasped hands, Basil and Narka had not exchanged a word, and yet each was conscious of being intently observant of the other.

'How is Marguerite?' Basil inquired suddenly.

'Oh, she is nearly all right,' replied M. de Beaucrillon.

'I will go and tell the good news,' said Narka. 'She will be overjoyed.'

'Why should I not go and take it to her? I want to see how she is,' said Basil.

He stood up; but it seemed an effort to him; he looked like a man utterly spent with fatigue.

'Mon chèr,' said his brother-in-law, 'take my advice and go up to your own room. A bath will refresh you more than anything, to begin with.'

'M. de Beaucrillon is right,' said Narka; 'you will have a better appetite, too, when you are rested a bit.'

She said this to give Basil the chance of getting away and being alone with her for a moment. She had a terrible piece of news to communicate to him, and the sight of his weariness, which seemed as much mental as physical, pained her to the heart, and made what she had to say harder even than she had expected.

Basil consented to take his brother-in-law's advice, and followed Narka leisurely out of the drawing-room. She was on the landing at the head of the stairs, when he made a sign that he wanted to speak to her.

They entered his study together. Basil went straight to his desk, unlocked it, and took out a bundle of letters.

'I want you to keep these for me,' he said; 'but I won't give them to you unless you are certain that you can secrete them beyond any chance of discovery.'

'You may give them to me,' Narka replied.

And he gave them to her.

Nothing more was said: they knew that one was offering, and the other accepting, a trust which involved terrible possibilities to both.

'And now I have something else to tell you,' Basil said. 'They have trapped me; a warrant is out for my arrest.'

'Ah! you know!' Narka exclaimed, almost relieved at not having to break the news to him. 'Ivan told me; but they have not caught you yet. There is time to escape.'

'Escape is out of the question. The house is watched, and I have been followed all the way from X. I met the Stanovoï there, and he announced the good news to me.'

'*He* told you about it? Then he offered you some alternative, some chance of escape?'

'He did; but I can't take advantage of it; I haven't got the money. Every available rouble has been raised for Father Chris-

topher's ransom. I called at Ivan's on my way here; but he is absent. That was my one chance, and I have missed it.'

'What is the sum?' Narka said, a sudden hope making her heart leap.

'Fifty thousand roubles! And to be paid by nine o'clock to-night.'

'Basil, I have got the money. Listen!' Her face was flushed; her great eyes shone; her voice trembled with the palpitating joy that filled her as she hurriedly told him about the legacy. And now she had only to go into X. and fetch it. 'Oh, what a blessed mercy that it came just in time! I will ride in at once; it is now half-past four; a good horse will take me there and back in two hours and a half. There will be no delay; I will be here again by seven o'clock, in time for dinner. No one need know I have been absent. It will be quite easy; there is plenty of time.'

She was turning away in a tremor of excitement when Basil arrested her.

'Narka,' he said, laying his hand on her

arm, 'you are a noble-hearted friend; but do you think I am such a pitiful dog as to take this money from you?'

'What do you mean?' she said, looking at him in bewilderment. 'Is it because it is mine that you would refuse it? Oh, Basil!'

There was a cry of pain in her voice as from a wounded creature; there was a confession, too, in it that betrayed the secret of her heart.

'I would take anything from you,' he said, conscious of a slight shock and of a sudden burst of tenderness towards her; 'but you can't give it to me without sacrificing yourself and your mother. Heaven knows when I could repay it. No, I can't be such a brute as to rob Tante Nathalie!'

'And you think it will be less brutal to kill me? Yes, it will kill me if they arrest you, for I know, and so do you, what will happen, once you are in their hands. My mother knows nothing about this money; she need never know until you can give it back to us. Oh, Basil! Basil! don't refuse me; it will

kill me if you do!' Her voice broke, her eyes were raised to his, brimful of tears, and saying as plainly as ever eyes of woman spoke, 'I love you!'

Basil was moved to the core of his heart. He forgot that he was Prince Zorokoff, and that Narka was a low-born Jewess; he forgot everything except that this beautiful girl loved him, and was offering her all to save him.

He opened wide his arms. 'Narka!'

With a sob, she sank into his embrace. For one long moment he held her clasped. Then lifting her head from his shoulder,

'Yes, I will take this money from you,' he said; 'but only on one condition: will you give me yourself with it? Have you the courage to be my wife?'

'I would give my life for you,' she answered.

He kissed her on the lips.

'Basil,' she said, 'I have loved you all my life.'

'Dearest, and so have I loved you.'

And he spoke the truth; but with a difference.

'I must be going,' she said, struggling away from him, but he tightened one arm round her.

'Wait a moment. We must pledge our betrothal first.'

Drawing her towards a table, he unlocked a drawer and took out a diamond ring, a hoop of beautiful stones.

'This was my mother's betrothal ring,' he said, slipping it on her finger. 'Wear it till you come back from X.; then let it hang as an amulet round your neck until I can place it on your finger before all the world.'

'May Sibyl not know?' she asked, with timid hesitation.

'No; let it remain a secret between ourselves until we meet. It will be another link binding us together.'

He was alluding to the ransom she was giving him; but Narka grew pale.

'Yes,' she said, almost under her breath, 'it will be another bond between us.'

He kissed her again, and she hurried away, carrying with her the packet of letters he had intrusted to her.

Basil went to Marguerite's door and knocked; but getting no answer, he went down to the dining-room. Sibyl was there waiting for him, and sat with him while he partook of the meal that had been hastily ordered up. Basil was only four-and-twenty, and he was in rude health, and no amount of mental trouble could destroy his appetite, or take away the natural cravings of hunger.

Sibyl saw that he was too tired to care to talk much, so she busied herself helping him to good things, and kept up a lively flow of monologue, telling him all that had happened since his departure, the excitement in the village, Marguerite's illness, everything that could interest him and save him the trouble of answering, further than by an occasional remark or question.

But while Basil was listening to Sibyl, his thoughts were elsewhere. He was in a strange state of mind and feeling. It seemed

to him as if he had suddenly become another person, as if a new Basil had been added to the old one. He hardly realized yet what he had done, or what was to come of it. He had made a tremendous leap in the dark, and he was wondering where it had landed him. He had taken a step which must change the whole aspect and current of his life. He had done it without a moment's premeditation, on the spur of an impulse of —passion, was it? or generous gratitude? He was not calm enough to analyze his own heart at this crisis, or balance nicely the conflicting forces which had moved him to ask Narka to be his wife. And what would Sibyl say? She loved Narka dearly, as dearly as if they had been sisters in flesh and blood; but this personal fondness was quite compatible with invincible repugnance to Narka as a sister-in-law; Sibyl's soft grace of manner was so entirely free from *morgue* as to lead her inferiors to believe she was altogether unconscious of any superiority towards them; but beneath this outward

suavity there existed a spirit of family pride that was hard as flint and strong to fanaticism. How would she take the announcement that a Jewish trader's daughter was going to queen it over her as Princess Zorokoff, the head of the family ?

This was not the only problem that was vexing Basil's soul while he ate his caviare and salad. The image of Marguerite kept forcing itself before his eyes with a persistency that was unwarrantably troublesome. He had long since recognised in his little French cousin a creature of a different mould from any that he had ever met ; the charm of her brightness, her happy spirit, her child-like freshness of heart, had been working on him like a spell. He had been aware of this, and had not attempted to resist the influence; he knew that it was Sibyl's cherished dream that he should marry Marguerite, and he had been only held back from pursuing it by the fear that he had entangled himself in political engagements from which it would be cowardly and unfaithful to break loose. Still he had

been in a dreamy, delicious way caressing possibilities, and it had struck him more than once that Marguerite would not have repulsed him. Basil was not vainer than most men, but he could not help seeing that she changed colour sometimes under his glance, and that her saucy, wistful eyes took a softer, a more timid expression when they met his ; he had noted these signs with a pleasant sense of power unchecked by any scruples or remorse, for he had the consciousness of being quite willing, and he suspected able, to heal any wound he might make in her innocent young heart.

But now he saw things differently. His conscience smote him ; he felt a pang at the thought of having perhaps involuntarily inflicted one on her. He longed to see her ; he must see her once again. It would be with very different feelings now from those with which he would have met her an hour ago ; but he thought of Narka, of her ripe, glowing beauty, her tender, self-sacrificing love, and he would not let himself by so

much as a passing sigh be unfaithful to the loyalty he had sworn to her.

Marguerite was in the drawing-room when he returned there with Sibyl. The meeting was much less awkward than Basil had feared. It was natural that he should be affectionately interested in his cousin, who looked still pale enough to warrant Sibyl's reproach that she had been tiring herself by writing letters.

'You must let me put you lying down, chérie,' Sibyl said, 'and Basil will tell us all about his journey while you are resting.'

But Basil protested regretfully that he could not enjoy this relief of sitting quietly and talking to them. He must go and tell Ivan Gorff the good news before he could enjoy anything.

'We will send for him to come up and hear it,' suggested Sibyl.

'No, no; I must take it to him myself,' Basil replied, with a touch of impatience that silenced her.

Ivan was a pretext for going to the Stanovoï to inform him that the money would be forth-

coming. Basil could not tell Sibyl that he was under warrant of arrest; he felt unequal to the effort of having to console her, and, besides, he was not yet certain of being able to ransom himself. Narka might have some delay, the notary might be out, the key of his strong-box might not be forthcoming at once, an accident might have happened: who could tell? When luck is against a man, he must reckon with bad chances.

M. de Beaucrillon offered to accompany his brother-in-law, but Basil said that, as Sophie was ill, Ivan might not be disposed to receive a visit. It was rather a lame excuse, but M. de Beaucrillon understood, as Sibyl did, that he wished to see Ivan alone, and did not press his company upon him. It was natural enough, Gaston said to himself, that, under the circumstances, Basil should fight shy of a Frenchman; the latter rather admired him for being ashamed that a foreigner should witness the way his country was governed. Poor fellow, he looked piteously worn, Gaston thought, as he noticed his sunken eyes and

haggard, unkempt appearance, like that of a man who has not slept for nights.

Ivan was not at home, as Basil, who had met him at X, knew; but the Stanovoï was. The functionary asked no questions. So long as he got his money, he did not care where it came from. He assumed that the French brother-in-law had come down with it; in fact, he had reckoned on this when he named so exorbitant a figure. The Zorokoffs were wealthy, but ready money was scarce at Yrakow; it all went to St. Petersburg, where the Prince made it fly as fast as he got it; the castle kept itself; there was plenty on the property of all that was wanted, and what the property did not provide was done without. The result was that odd mixture of lavish abundance and uncivilized discomfort, traces of which were even still visible in certain details, notwithstanding Sibyl's presence and the reign of orderly splendour that she brought with her.

The interview with the Stanovoï was short. Basil had nothing else to do in the village,

and nowhere else to go, and two hours must yet elapse before Narka returned, reckoning all chances favourable. He could not bring himself to go back to the house, and spend the interval with Marguerite and the others. The effort of deceiving them, and keeping the secret that was holding his very life in suspense, was more than he felt equal to. In another hour he would go back and quietly put up the few things he wanted to take with him.

The night had closed in, and the moon had not risen, so it was nearly pitch-dark. Basil paced along the road, ruminating in bitter perplexity of spirit. Suddenly Peter, his dog, gave a low growl, and then an angry bark, as if warning off an enemy close at hand. Basil had no doubt but that some agent of the Stanovoï's was watching him. He struck a match, and looked at his watch. Narka had been gone nearly an hour and a half. It was time he went home and got ready to start, assuming that he was to do so. He turned back, walking quickly, for the air

was frosty, and his breath made a cloud before him as he went. Suddenly the moon rose, a few stars sprang out in attendance, and the road, black a moment before, was washed with light. On one side there was a copse, towards which Peter's ill-will was directed, judging from the way he growled at it now and then. Basil, following the dog's indication, kept looking that way; the outer trees threw a tracery of shadow and sheen on the ground, but farther back it was all a chaos of stems; presently his eyes, sharpened by presentiment, descried the figure of a man stealing along through the woods. Basil was quite certain that he had been watched since he left X., but the sight of this spy, dogging him in the dark, made him realize the fact with a shock, and it seemed also to bring more vividly before him the nearness of the peril on the brink of which he stood. If Narka should be late, or fail in her errand?

How slowly the time dragged on! He quickened his step; his footfall rang sharp and clear on the hard road. Peter trotted on,

and ceased to growl. Suddenly he stood, tail and ears up-pricked; then, with a loud bark, turned and dashed back down the road. Basil turned too, and listened. Was that the sound of galloping hoofs that he heard? Could it be Narka? He stopped smoking, he almost stopped breathing, as the sound drew nearer. Peter was barking violently, joyously. The horse came in sight. It was Narka! Basil stepped into the middle of the road, where the brilliant moonlight shone unobstructed by a shadow, and waved his hand. She pulled up, and in a moment he was beside her.

'Here it is,' she said in a cautious tone, stooping over him. 'I will ride on, and leave this poor beast at the stables, and wait for you in the court.'

She unclasped the heavy bag that was fastened round her waist, and Basil took it, and walked on rapidly after her.

On entering the outer court he ordered a groom to get ready a carriage with four stout horses. He then walked on into the second

court ; he was about to enter the house when some one stepped forward, and said :

'Does your Excellency want to speak to me?'

'Ah ! it is you. Yes, I want to speak to you,' Basil replied, with a short laugh. 'Very considerate of you to turn up just at the right moment. Come in here, will you ?'

The Stanovoï followed him into the house, and they entered a room close at hand. Basil struck a light. They were closeted for a few minutes—just long enough to count the money.

'Now, Excellency, depart with speed, and don't let the grass grow under your feet till you have passed the frontier.'

The Stanovoï bowed low, and, hugging his bag, went out.

Narka was waiting in the entry when Basil reappeared. The tawny flame of an oil-lamp gave enough light to let them see each other. Basil caught her in his arms and kissed her again and again ; then, brusquely releasing her, he turned to ascend the stairs, and flew up to his room.

Narka, in a tumult of bliss and agitation, went up to hers. She was shaken to pieces by her mad ride; but there was no time to rest; there was no time to think. She must be ready to go to Basil before he went downstairs, and say good-bye to him alone before going through the ceremony of doing so in the drawing-room. She divested herself quickly of her riding-habit, and proceeded to attire herself in a dress of white cashmere that Basil admired; it was a fantastic garment of her own contrivance, made with much artistic effect, but quite regardless of fashion. She clasped a dead-gold band round her waist, and fastened a crimson rose in her hair, and, with a great joy and a great terror in her heart, went to seek Basil; but to her dismay, on reaching the broad landing on which his room opened she saw M. de Beaucrillon standing at the door. This was a terrible *contretemps;* there was nothing for it but to go downstairs, and trust to Basil managing to find a moment alone with her before he fled. She found Sibyl in the drawing-room.

'Well, you have seen Tante Nathalie?' exclaimed Sibyl, who had taken for granted that Narka had gone out with the good news to her mother. 'She will come out for a drive now, I hope? But oh, Narka, how ill Basil looks! Gaston says he has grown five years older this last week. What a time he stayed with Ivan! He has only just come back, it seems.'

'It has been a terrible week for all of us,' Narka said, ignoring the last remarks.

She was standing near a console, one hand resting on the porphyry slab; a large silver lamp, high-placed on a malachite pillar behind her, threw its golden light over her soft white draperies, and made her hair shine like a nimbus. Perhaps the light of a deep and tender joy burning in her eyes and trembling on her full red lips touched her with its outward and visible glory; for Sibyl, who had been gazing in a comfortable ecstasy up at the gods and goddesses on the ceiling, glanced at her suddenly, and was struck by something in her aspect.

'Narka,' she exclaimed, 'you look like an archangel!'

'Never having seen an archangel,' said M. de Beaucrillon, sauntering into the room, 'I was mentally comparing mademoiselle to a vestal, or a Greek bride.

'Why Greek, mon cher?' demanded Sibyl.

Narka blushed, and turned her large liquid glance smilingly on M. de Beaucrillon. It was not often he took the trouble to be complimentary, and, being a woman and beautiful, she was pleased. But it was not selfish coquetry that made her feel that sudden thrill of exultation in her own beauty; she was proud of it for Basil's sake now.

Partly to escape from the embarrassment of standing to be admired, and partly from her natural impulse to give vent to her overwrought feelings in song, she moved to the piano, and sat down and began to warble a bridal song in Russian. The words were unintelligible to M. de Beaucrillon, but the pathos of the melody and the penetrating sweetness of the voice moved him strangely.

He said to himself, as he gazed and listened :

'What can Zorokoff be made of, that he has not fallen under the spell of such a creature ?'

When the bridal song came to an end—quickly, for Narka was impatient to escape—he entreated her to sing it again. She could not refuse, and perhaps the impatience of her soul made her throw more fire of passion into the pathetic melody, for when it ceased M. de Beaucrillon was so overcome that he had not a word of thanks ready, but let her rise from the piano in silence.

'What can be keeping Marguerite so long, I wonder ?' Narka remarked ; 'I must go and see ;' and she walked slowly out of the room.

'And what can be keeping Basil ?' said Sibyl, growing fidgety ; 'I think I must go and look after him.'

'He was taking a bath when I knocked just now, Vasili told me,' replied Gaston.

'Oh, then he will be here presently, no doubt ;' and she sat down.

As she did so, a valet came in with a letter, which he presented to her. It was in Basil's writing. Sibyl opened it, and drew out a sealed envelope addressed to Father Christopher, and then a note that she read rapidly.

'Oh, my God! This is too dreadful!' she cried out.

M. de Beaucrillon snatched up the note.

'Good heavens! Gone! Fled!'

With a muttered expletive he threw down the letter, and proceeded to try and calm Sibyl, who had burst into hysterical grief.

Meantime Narka had gone and knocked at Basil's door, and, getting no answer, opened it. The room was empty. She called his name, but there was no response. In a flash of lightning she guessed the truth: he was gone. But where? Could the Stanovoï have played him false? She glanced round the rooms. The lights were burning, but there was nothing to give the least clue to why or how he had fled. Faint with terror, Narka took up a candle and went on to her own room. Perhaps he was there waiting for

her. The room was empty, but on the table —a little round table, with a green velvet cover, on which there was a solitary book— lay a letter. At a glance she saw it was from Basil.

'My Narka,

'I have not the courage to meet you again, since we have to part at once. Adieu! I will write when it is possible. I owe you my life. It is yours for all time.

'Basil.'

Narka sank into a chair, clutching the note in her fingers. Gone! Without one more embrace! How could he! But the relief of knowing that he had escaped, that he had not been treacherously entrapped to his ruin, as she had for a moment feared, was so great that it helped her to forget the cruel disappointment. She recovered herself quickly, and remembered, with that strong sympathy for the suffering of others which was the noble side of her nature, that Sibyl and Marguerite would want to be sustained under

this shock. Ah, Marguerite! Narka's heart went out to the child in a rush of purest pity. She rose and hurried to her room; but the news had got there before her. Marguerite was on her knees by the bed, her face buried in the eider-down, sobbing bitterly, so bitterly that she did not hear the door open, or Narka's step crossing the room; she was only made aware of her entrance when Narka knelt down and took her in her arms and drew her head upon her breast. Marguerite gave herself up to the caress; it was pitiful and tender as ever one woman gave to another. Narka had guessed her secret, and it had fired her at first with a jealous fear that lay close upon hatred; but that was gone now, and she felt nothing but compassion; she could afford to give her whole sympathy to the woman who loved Basil, and loved him hopelessly.

When the first paroxysm of tears had spent itself, Marguerite raised her head from Narka's shoulder, and they stood up together.

'Oh, Narka, it is terrible!' she said,

struggling with the sobs that made her bosom heave. 'If we only knew that he was safe!'

'He is safe, darling; that we may be certain of,' said Narka.

'Oh, thank God! I only heard that he was gone; that Sibyl had a few words saying he had to fly. Where is he gone? do you know?'

'He is making for the frontier; and once beyond it, he will be out of danger.'

Marguerite murmured something that was swallowed up in a great sob. After a moment she laid her hand on Narka's shoulder, and putting her lips close to her ear:

'Tell me,' she said, in a whisper that was scarcely audible, 'is it—is he only accused of politics, or is it—anything else, do you know?'

'They have accused him of nothing worse than of hating tyrants and of conspiring against them.'

'Ah!'

The exclamation sounded like a gasp of relief.

They were silent for a minute, standing close together, Narka, like a strong archangel, with her arm thrown protectingly round the small, childlike figure that was still shaken with sobs.

'Darling,' said Narka, 'you are too agitated to come downstairs, or see anyone this evening. I will put you to bed, and tell them that you were not well.'

Marguerite understood. She kissed Narka, and gave herself up like a child to be undressed and put to bed.

CHAPTER X.

WAITING FOR FATHER CHRISTOPHER.

MONSIEUR DE BEAUCRILLON wanted to be off next morning. Sibyl had some difficulty in making him see that this was impossible: there was a multitude of things to be done, she urged—things that she alone could do. All the festivities and hospitalities had been countermanded and put off; but preparations for these had been made on the grandest scale, and this involved a large settling of accounts that no one else could attend to. Besides these reasons, Basil had enclosed to her in his own short note a letter for Father Christopher, which he desired she would

hand him herself. Sibyl could not leave this commission unfulfilled ; and, moreover, it was out of the question her going away without seeing Father Christopher, quite independently of other impediments. The Mayor, in answer to her inquiry whether they were to expect the Father that day, sent word that no message had been received from X., but that it was not likely he would be set free before Monday, certain formalities having to be gone through before a prisoner was released, even after the receipt of the order to that effect.

'What confounded humbug!' said M. de Beaucrillon ; 'the brutes are just doing it in order to make me spend another Sunday in this place. Well, look here, Sibyl ; I'll wait till Monday, but on Tuesday morning we start. There is a limit to what man can bear.'

'My dear Gaston, the limit is very soon reached with you,' said Sibyl.

'Just look at her!' Gaston said, appealing to Narka ; 'look at the state her eyes are in!

The lids are so red and swollen that they are frightful to behold, and she looks about thirty! Your head is aching fit to split,' he added, looking defiantly at his wife; 'I know it is. You did not sleep an hour last night. Just look at yourself in the glass, and see what a complexion you have!'

There was something grotesque to Narka in the spectacle of a man standing before his wife, bewailing her swollen eyes and her damaged complexion, when such grievous anxiety was absorbing those around him.

If Father Christopher did not arrive to-morrow, Saturday, it was likely enough they would retain him to keep the Sabbath day at X., and not let him free until Monday, as the Stanovoï suggested. M. de Beaucrillon made up his mind to the worst, and heroically faced the fact that he had still three whole days to bear up under the deadly pall of this place. He was anxious, unselfishly anxious, on Marguerite's account, to be off. He could not but see that she was looking wretched.

'This place doesn't suit you, petite perle,'

he said, taking her chin between his finger and thumb, and imprinting a brotherly kiss on her forehead. 'I wish we were back in France; if we had to spend another month here, you and Sibyl would be in your coffins; and I should probably be in mine. This atmosphere of dramatic emotions, sudden arrests, and hairbreadth escapes, of cruelty and agonized despair, is enough to suffocate any man not to the manner born. I feel as if I were playing a subordinate and rather contemptible part in a high tragedy. It is intolerable.'

He remembered, however, that it was only to last three days longer, so he took heart, lighted a cigar, and went out for a ride. M. de Beaucrillon was the only person at Yrakow who rejoiced in the prospect of the approaching departure. To Narka it was one of bitter pain. Parting with Sibyl was to her like parting with fire in midwinter. When Sibyl went away, the glory of the land departed with her. Eldorado to Narka was a place where all the women were like Sibyl, and—if

this were possible even in Eldorado—all the men like Basil. She had, it is true, a supreme consolation to sustain her under the present parting; but even this had its drop of bitterness; she felt guilty of a kind of treachery in not telling Sibyl of her engagement. She both longed and dreaded to tell her. How would Sibyl take it? Would she open her arms and welcome her as Basil's wife? or would that pride of birth which ran through her veins as naturally, and almost as unceasingly, as her blood, rise up like a snake and turn against the old sisterly love and sting it to death? Narka had been asking herself this question ever since Basil had slipped the ring upon her finger last night. But there were many other things she longed to talk over with Sibyl: Basil's personal concerns; his chances of being forgiven and permitted to return to Russia; the possibility of indefinite exile; all that this involved—the ruin of his career, the utter blight of his prospects. But she dared not trust herself to enter on these things, lest involuntarily

she might betray the secret which Basil enjoined on her to keep strictly ; it seemed as if the very tone in which she now pronounced his name must tell a tale, it sounded to herself so full of consciousness.

Sibyl, on her side, had a multitude of interests that she wanted to talk over with Narka ; but she made up her mind to wait until the tiresome necessary things were done, and then to devote the remaining short time to undisturbed enjoyment of her friend. One thing she did enter on at once that afternoon. It was to ask Narka to come with Tante Nathalie and spend the winter at the castle, instead of living in their cottage in the village. But Narka refused. She loved the lordly old fortress, with its towers and stately rooms and echoing galleries, and pictures and works of art ; these surroundings were as pleasant and congenial to her as space and the free air of nature to the denizens of the forest ; but she could not stay in possession of them now that they were prospectively her own ; there would be a sort of hypocrisy

in accepting Sibyl's offer, it seemed to her; so she declined it on the plea that they, two lone women, would feel less lonely in their snug little cottage, with humble neighbours all round them, than in the splendid solitude of the castle.

Next morning, Saturday, M. de Beaucrillon proposed, the moment he came downstairs, that if Father Christopher was not back by twelve o'clock, or if there was no assurance of the exact time of his return, Sibyl should drive in to X. after lunch and see the governor of the prison, and ask what the delay meant. Sibyl began to protest at the utter foolishness of such a step, which would advance nothing, besides wasting one of the last precious days at Yrakow; but her husband was resolute, so she yielded.

'We shall have a quiet time together on the road, anyhow; that will be something,' she said to Narka.

Narka was glad; glad, above all, to feel that Sibyl held to a quiet time with her; that she was sighing for one of those heart-to-heart

talks they had been used to in old times, and had scarcely enjoyed with real satisfaction during these three weeks when Sibyl had been taken up with hospitable cares and activities.

Marguerite was to drive down in the pony-carriage with Narka to see Tante Nathalie after lunch.

'To think that I have not been to see your mother all this time!' she said regretfully; 'and now I am only going to say good-bye.'

At eleven o'clock it began to rain—a heavy, slanting rain that drove against the window-panes and washed them. The rain stopped, and it began to snow; first in a sleety shower, then in thick flakes that made a white fog, and quickly spread a white layer on the wet ground. The drive to X. was a dreary outlook. There was just the possibility, however, that it might be avoided. Father Christopher might return before they set out. If he came, he would come early, the Stanovoï said.

The snow continued to fall with increasing

volume; the wind rose, and blew steadily from the north, driving the flakes furiously before it. Twelve o'clock came. There was no message, and no arrival. The carriage was to be ready at one, and take Narka and Marguerite down to Tante Nathalie for half an hour, and then return to take Sibyl and Narka in to X.

Sibyl was in the library, writing off the last notes. She was so busy that she did not hear the luncheon-bell. Marguerite came and fetched her; but they had scarcely entered the dining-room when a servant rushed in with the news that a carriage, which had been coming at full speed along the X. road, had just entered the park.

'It is Father Christopher!' cried Sibyl; and with a chorus of glad exclamations they all hurried into the drawing-room, where a large bow-window commanded the drive almost to the lodge-gate.

The carriage came on through the blinding snow. Sibyl was laughing and crying with joy; Marguerite was in a flutter of excite-

ment ; Narka, outwardly calm, but with a beating heart, watched the carriage drawing near.

'Let us meet him in the hall,' said M. de Beaucrillon, as the horses swept round to the terrace.

They ran out, ready with a joyous welcome.

The door was open ; but it was not Father Christopher who stood on the threshold. It was an officer in uniform.

'The Countess de Beaucrillon ?' he inquired, looking from one to another of the three ladies.

Sibyl stepped forward, and he handed her a letter.

She tore it open, and ran her eye down the page. Then, with a piercing scream, 'My God ! they have sent him to Siberia !'

CHAPTER XI.

MARGUERITE'S VOCATION.

WINTER reigned at Yrakow in all its severity. The castle, with its mighty bastions and battlements sheeted in snow, went shelving down to the white forest; the fields on every side presented an interminable rolling white plain; the whole earth was buried deep in snow; and still it snowed, and snowed. Narka would stand at the window and watch the flakes falling until the monotony of the motion almost sent her to sleep. The ghost-like stillness was overpowering; it seemed to wrap everything in a winding-sheet. Not a sound made a break in it all day long. In

the night-time, the wolves came down into the village and howled ; but except for that dismal concert, the land might have been a graveyard, so profound was the hush. Any sound would have been a relief—the voice of a man, the cry of an animal, the creaking of a waggon ; but these would have seemed as phenomenal as if the stars had begun to talk in the midnight skies.

The death-like silence of external nature was made doubly oppressive to Narka by the moral silence which enveloped her like a shroud. Life was becalmed in a fog. She never heard from Basil. He had not sent her a sign since they had kissed and parted after that ride of hers to X. This cessation of all intercourse between them was inevitable ; but at times it was unbearable. If she could have moved away anywhere, have changed place, it would have helped her, for the immobility of life adds fearfully to its weight and weariness ; the spirit is wonderfully relieved sometimes by the flight of the body, and the old Egyptians expressed a common

human need, as well as a deep spiritual mystery, in their emblem of the sistrum agitated on either side of the sitting god for a sign that motion was Life, and stagnation Death. There was nothing to stir the waters round Narka, and her moral life seemed to be stagnating like a pool in the desert.

Tante Nathalie's rheumatism and peevish complainings did not enliven the monotony much. She, good soul, found excitement enough in her own troubles, past and present, in her knitting, and the few comings and goings of the morning. This daily routine, with the ever new interest of ordering the meals and lecturing the servant, was enough to keep her occupied; but Narka's hungry, ardent soul craved for something more, and the dull white days and the long black nights dragged on with intolerable weight.

Sibyl's letters were the solitary incidents that broke the leaden monotony of her life. Sibyl gave her news of Basil. They had agreed to speak of him as 'M. Charles,' a cousin of Gaston's. But even this disguise

had to be carefully used, for of course the letters were opened. M. Charles could not send messages to Narka, whom he was supposed never to have seen. Sibyl could only say that he was hoping to make her acquaintance, and inquiring when she was coming to France, etc. He was himself in Italy, studying painting; he hoped to come to Paris in the spring, unless his father insisted on his accompanying him to Scotland, *alias* Russia. These meagre details were to Narka like drops of water to a thirsty soul.

About her own life Sibyl spoke freely. It was evidently a very pleasant one, full of gay activities, balls, concerts, dinners, and all the brilliant devices of modern society for making the days fly; there were also benevolent contrivances for helping the destitute, and very pleasant opportunities they seemed to be, by Sibyl's accounts. But what interested Narka most in these personal records was the place that her absent self filled in them. She seemed seldom long out of Sibyl's thoughts, however busy or brilliant the chapter of her

life might be. 'Oh, Narka, I miss you so terribly! I feel your absence more and more every day. There is nobody like you—nobody whose sympathy is like yours,' etc., etc. Words like these recurred at every page, and they were as wine to Narka. It gave her confidence in herself to be reckoned thus amongst the best values of Sibyl's life. Since Sibyl, who had all the world to choose from —Sibyl, whose taste was so refined, whose sympathies were so noble, whose instinct was so true—since Sibyl set such store upon her, she could not be the poor worthless creature she sometimes fancied herself in moments of despair. Then she would remember that Basil loved her; that she was his affianced bride; that he too was reckoning the days until he could claim her for his own, and present her to Sibyl and all the world as his wife. She could surely afford to wait, and to be patient under the present, when the future held such joy in store for her.

Marguerite wrote occasionally, brightly and affectionately. But towards the close of the

winter, Sibyl began to speak of Marguerite with anxiety: the child's health was very delicate; there was no organic ailment, but she was drooping like a flower; they had had several excellent offers of marriage for her, but she had refused them all, giving no reason except that she was not in a hurry to marry.

Narka read all this with growing apprehension. Could it be that Marguerite's feeling for Basil had been deep enough to make her shrink from the idea of ever marrying anyone else? Narka had never contemplated such trouble as this. She had hoped, and had come honestly to believe, that it had been a mere passing flame, such as the first accomplished man she meets kindles easily in the heart of a very young girl. It would indeed be an added weight on Narka's spirit if bright little Marguerite was entering on life with a broken heart.

One day a letter came announcing that the doctors had ordered her to go south, and travel for a couple of months.

'The remedy comes most opportunely,'

Sibyl said. 'M. Charles has been lingering on in Florence, intending to go to Rome for Lent. It will be delightful for us to join him there, and I am very much in need of a change myself. Marguerite had at first seemed charmed at the idea of going to Rome, but all of a sudden, when the programme was settled, she changed her mind, and has been nervous and depressed ever since. The doctors say this unreasonable state of feeling is only an additional proof that she wants change, and they assure us the journey will set her right. We are now in the bustle of packing, and I shall probably not write again until we are starting.'

Narka could not pretend to herself that this letter was not a shock. She was not jealous; she did not for a moment doubt the strength of Basil's constancy; but it was hardly in woman's nature that she should not feel uncomfortable at the prospect of his being thrown for two months into daily and hourly companionship with a charming girl who was

deeply in love with him, and whom he was already very fond of. Oh no, Narka was not jealous; but her heart rose in passionate rebellion against the cruel fate which put mountains and seas between her and Basil, and forced him into the society of Marguerite. And it was Sibyl's doing! For the first time in her life, Narka felt angry with Sibyl. It was very well to talk about the lucky chance that had brought this meeting about; it was much more likely the result of Sibyl's clever manœuvring. She had long ago set her heart on this marriage; fate, which was fighting against Narka with such overpowering odds, was playing into Sibyl's hands—those pearly, *potelées* hands whose soft touch had such a compelling power, and had always made everybody and everything bend to their will. They were now bending Marguerite's destiny to it. Was it quite impossible that they should eventually bend Basil's?

Narka was as restless in the narrow cottage rooms as a strong, untamed creature

in a cage. It was horrible to carry this gun-shot wound in her flesh, and to be forced to go about with a smiling countenance, discussing with Madame Larik the best way of preparing the codfish for dinner. The comedy of life was intolerable. Why should heaven and earth be set against her, as they had been from her cradle up ?

'Narka, you are singing like a soul in Purgatory crying out for prayers,' said her mother, as poor Narka gave vent to her misery in a strain of passionate music.

'Mother, I *am* a soul in Purgatory,' she answered with a dry laugh. 'It is my firm belief that this life *is* Purgatory, and that in the next there will be only Heaven and Hell.'

'Dear! dear! what a wonderful notion you have about things! Your head is too full of poetry, child ; not but that there may be some sense in what you say. I do believe this life is Purgatory to many of us, and mostly to those who don't want any Purgatory, one would think. Alas! alas!'

Narka knew that the concluding sigh was directed to Father Christopher. Each knew that he was seldom out of the other's mind, but, as if by tacit consent, they never spoke of him.

A week went by. There was a fresh fall of snow in the night. The next morning the wind rose, and blew with its might from the north. A peasant coming on horseback from X. said the roads were impassable from the drifts that rose like embankments at intervals. For the next week traffic was suspended. If Prince Zorokoff had been at home, or Count Larchoff alive, there would have been an army of scavengers at work ; but there was no one there now to press the peasants into the service. Even the Stanovoï was away at X., which was pleasanter in this weather than snowed-up Yrakow.

At the end of three weeks the welcome face of the postman appeared at the cottage-gate. He brought two letters from Sibyl. One bore the Paris postmark, the other that of Palermo. Narka went up to her room

to read them alone. She opened the one from Paris first.

'I have a most extraordinary piece of news to tell you, Narka,' Sibyl began. 'I ought to have written to you sooner, but I was so bewildered at the first moment that I had not the courage to finish a letter I had just begun to you.

'I told you that Marguerite showed the strangest reluctance to go to Italy when everything was settled. It puzzled us all. She was very nervous and quite miserable, but gave no explanation of her sudden change. At last, one morning before I was up, she came into my room, and sat on the edge of my bed, and said: "I have something to say that will be a surprise, and I fear a disappointment, to you. I can't go with you to Italy. I have made up my mind to be a Sister of Charity." I was so taken aback that I could not speak for a moment, but just stared at her as if she had gone mad. "I have been thinking about it for a long time,"

she went on, "and I am now quite sure it is my vocation. The idea of going to Rome and seeing the Holy Father tempted me at first; but I soon saw it was only a temptation, and that I must not yield to it; so instead of going off with you and Gaston, I am going to the Rue du Bac to make my novitiate." I really did think that the child had gone out of her mind. "Why," I said, "you will be dead in a month; the hardships of the life will kill you." She laughed, and said, "Oh no; I promise you not to be dead before two months; you will be back in time to see me alive." I did not know whether to burst out crying or to be very angry. She looked so sweet and bright, and yet there was something so unnatural in the idea of her doing such a thing. Oh, Narka, if you could have seen the expression of her eyes, those clear brown eyes of hers, when she went on to talk about the happiness of giving her whole life to God, and making atonement for those who offend Him! The idea of atonement seems to have taken hold of her like an *idée fixe*. I said

that if she had had a wicked father, or if anyone belonging to her had committed a crime, I could understand it; then there would be some sense, or some show of reason, in her putting on a stuff gown, and burying herself in slums and hospitals; but she said that every sinner was her brother, and she felt a call to suffer and atone for them. In fact, she has atonement on the brain.

'She asked me to break the news to Gaston. I was quite ill at the thought of having to do it. I have such a horror of seeing anybody in pain; above all, anyone I love. However, it had to be done; so I did it. He cried like a child, dear Gaston. But he was not at all as shocked as I expected. He said if it was her vocation he would not lift a finger to hold her back. He talked like a theologian about people being "called to the religious life." I never could have believed Gaston knew so much about theology; but Frenchmen are so strange; they are full of contradictions. I was so upset by all these emotions that I had to keep lying down all

the afternoon, with compresses of *eau sédative* on my head; and——'

Narka at this point let the letter drop, and, interlacing her long white fingers, she straightened up her arms above her head, and heaved a great gasp of relief. It was not for herself that she was relieved. Oh no; it was for Marguerite! Gentle, sensitive little Marguerite, who had escaped from such a cruel ordeal. Loving Basil as she did, it would have been torture to the child to be thrown into constant companionship with him, to be the object of his brotherly solicitude, to be forced under the charm of his sympathetic nature—a charm that no one came near Basil without succumbing to. How could she have endured this for two whole months, and not gone out of her mind? Narka lay back for a long moment, considering the danger and the pain that Marguerite had been spared.

This improvised vocation was of course a stratagem to escape from an intolerable trial.

They might safely let her go to the Rue du Bac during their tour to Italy ; they would find on their return that the vocation had come to an end. Narka smiled as she thought of Marguerite giving up her flowers and dainty coquettish toilets for the gray gown and the *cornette.* But, as she smiled, she felt a sudden prick of remorse and doubt. Could it be that the idea of offering up her young life in atonement had become an *idée fixe* strong enough to impel her to the sacrifice ?

Narka would not dwell on this possibility. There was another letter of Sibyl's to be read. She opened it with a pleasant anticipation of interest :

'Here we are, with ilexes and oranges making a background to the loveliest villa you can imagine ! The roses are scenting the air till the sweetness makes one tipsy. If only you were here to enjoy it with us, dearest Narka ! No delight is complete to me without you. You would find out so

many beauties that I can't see, and you would sing all this exquisite idyl to me with that heavenly voice of yours! Well, some day, please God, we shall see it together. . . . We had a most comfortable journey, and already Marguerite looks better for the change.—Oh! I forgot I had not written to you since I told you of the bombshell she threw at us about her vocation. Well, after a week spent in pleading and coaxing, appealing to her love for us, to every motive that could move her, the matter was decided by the Superioress of the white *cornettes*, a most fascinating woman, and a saint (Gaston says, who had several long talks with her). She told Marguerite that it would be better in every way for her to come away for the change, because the doctor of the community was in great doubt whether her health in its present state would prove equal to the hardships of the life; consequently the wisest thing would be to get up her strength before she made the trial. Marguerite was greatly disappointed at first, but after a day or so

she seemed to take a more cheerful view of things, and was quite satisfied to come away. And you can't imagine how much better she already looks—so much less pale and languid. She is in excellent spirits.

'M. Charles joined us at Naples. We were all delighted to meet. He is very thin, and looks a good deal older; but his health is good. We do our best to cheer him, and he is so happy to have us near him!'

Narka did not see what more Sibyl wrote. The reaction from the intense elation of the first letter to the disappointment of this made her feel sick. She sat, with the two letters in her lap, in a kind of half-stupor. Her mother's voice calling to her made her start as if she had been asleep, in a bad dream. Madame Larik knew that letters had come, and was impatient, of course, to hear all about them. Narka stood for a moment to recover her self-possession, and make up her mind how much she should tell. Perhaps it was best to read the letters as they were.

There was nothing in them that she need conceal, and the mere communicating of their contents would be a relief.

She went down to the sitting-room and read them aloud, and found Madame Larik a most responsive listener.

'What nonsense to talk of being a Sister of Charity! The pretty young creature! Of course there is a love affair at the bottom of it. Why does not Princess Sibyl find it out and settle it?'

'But you hear what M. de Beaucrillon says? He would not oppose her entering the convent in the least.'

'Then he ought to be ashamed of himself. I thought better of the Count. He was exceedingly polite to me. I suppose it is some great noble who has no money, or who has more than Mademoiselle Marguerite. Princess Sibyl told me that marriages in France are such matters of business! What a pity she and our young Prince could not take to each other! Who knows but they may, now that they are going to be together for a few

months ? I can't think why Prince Basil did not fall in love with her here.'

This was hard to hear and respond to ; but Narka felt it was not so hard as having to stifle the mention of the subject altogether.

CHAPTER XII.

BASIL'S CONFESSION.

THE weather had improved, the wind had fallen, and it was now possible to get out. The deep snow of course put riding out of the question; Narka regretted this, for she was a perfect horse-woman, and there was a favourite Arab of Sibyl's at the castle which was always at her orders. Her fearless command of the strong, spirited animal that bore her along with a stride as swift as a hound's gave her a sense of power that was exhilarating. While she was in the saddle, flying through the air like a bird, she felt like a prisoner enjoying a momentary escape from captivity. The flight

of the body seemed to liberate the spirit and give her breathing-space. Indoors she was obliged to keep strict guard over every look and gesture; she had to keep down her very thoughts with a strong hand lest they should find their way into her face, and betray her to Madame Larik's watchful eyes. This constant pressure on her life—that inner life which, to Narka, was so much more vital than the outward—made her sometimes feel as if she were, like the rivers, frozen and locked up in ice. When this feeling grew strong, she would take out the betrothal ring that she wore round her neck like an amulet, and she would slip it on her finger, and recall every word, every caress, of Basil's when he had placed it there, until her spirits rose and her heart expanded, and she could look forward to the coming spring, when the sun would shine out upon her life, and unlock its frozen stream and set its waters free.

The next best thing to a ride was a drive; so the first day the weather grew genial enough to admit of it she sent up to the

castle, where there were horses and vehicles of all sorts, to say she wanted a sleigh that afternoon. It was at the door at the hour she named.

The winter landscape was beautiful. The cabins and cottages, sheeted in smooth, hard snow, looked like marble shrines and tombs, from which the smoke curled up in blue spirals, like incense from thuribles. As the sleigh turned into the forest, the sun shone out, and the spectacle was so dazzling that Narka made the Cossack pull up, and paused to admire it. The wilderness of white trees stretched on and on as far as the eye could reach, tossing up their arms in every fantastic form against the sky; every bough was festooned with garlands of snow flowers, or laden with bunches of crystals that sparkled like diamonds in the sunlight. The forest might have been a cathedral in ruins, so profound was the silence; not the faintest murmur of insect-life disturbed the deep hush; the very air held its breath. Suddenly a branch, not strong enough to support its

mass of glittering stalactites, snapped and fell; the crash broke the stillness for a moment, but only to make it seem more profound the next.

There was something very impressive in this death-like silence of the white solitude that held so many secrets buried in its depths, so many mysteries that would never be revealed in this world. The forest was like the sea: it seldom gave up its dead. There was a pile of stones on the spot where Larchoff had been found. It had risen slowly; every stone that went to the heap had been flung with a curse, and this was the only monument which had been raised to the murdered man. As Narka noticed the snow-crusted trophy, a chill crept over her. Would that dark secret ever be revealed? The thought of Father Christopher made her heart sick, and yet she could not deny that the crime—or the accident—might have been followed by even a more unbearable sacrifice than his cruel captivity.

She told the Cossack to drive on, and felt sorry that she had stopped; the sight of that

mound chased away every other thought, and poisoned the pleasure of the drive. The sleigh bounded along for nearly an hour. Then she turned homeward, taking another road, that led past Ivan Gorff's house.

The absence of Ivan and Sophie was a great loss. They were not close friends; but Narka had known them all her life, and they were kind and pleasant neighbours. Moreover, Ivan would be sure to have news of Basil. Ivan's resources were numerous, sometimes mysteriously so.

As the sleigh was passing the gate, Narka was surprised to see the windows of the first story, where Sophie's rooms were, open. Could the Gorffs have returned? She desired the Cossack to turn in. The gate stood open, and as the sleigh flew up the broad walk to the house, Ivan himself appeared at a window. Before they had reached the door, he was in the hall waiting for her.

'This is a good omen!' he said, his whole countenance beaming with delighted surprise;

'I only arrived an hour ago. I was just going to see you.' He was radiant with pleasure, but his face wore deep traces of suffering, either moral or physical; perhaps both.

'How are you, Ivan?' said Narka, in a tone of kind anxiety that he was not used to from her.

'I am well,' he answered with a shrug of his broad shoulders; 'better than I ought to be, considering. Sophie is not well.'

'Oh, I am so sorry!' said Narka feelingly. 'Is it her chest?'

'Yes. She has a cough that shakes her to pieces. It is always in my ears like a death-knell. But I am a fool. She is better out of the world than in it. Have you had any news lately?' he asked, turning abruptly from the subject. It was evidently one he could not bear to discuss.

'No. Sibyl is afraid to give me much news.'

'She can't be too careful, or you either,' Ivan added with a significant nod. 'That

is why Basil does not dare write. Every line you write or receive is read. He is in good health. I saw him ten days ago. He was——'

'Ten days ago!' Narka interrupted eagerly. 'How is he? What is he doing?'

'He is waiting,' said Ivan, in his quiet way. 'Have you heard about his confession?'

'Confession?' repeated Narka, and she changed colour; 'no.'

'As soon as he heard the trick they had played him about Father Christopher's release, he wrote to the Prince, telling him that it was he who had shot Larchoff.'

'What!—Basil wrote that?'

'He said he had fired at him by mistake; that he would have acknowledged it at the moment, but he had not the courage to declare that he had accidentally taken the life of a man whom he was known to hate and to be on bad terms with. When Father Christopher was accused, he thought the best thing to do was to go to St. Petersburg and

sue for his release. And they cheated him into believing he had made it all right.'

'And then? What did the Prince do?'

Ivan gave a slow smile.

'He sent him word that his confession came too late to do any good to Father Christopher. Basil might have known this. What is written is written. The Prince said if he wanted to play heroics he might come back and give himself up as the murderer, and get sentence of death added to the sentence that was ready awaiting him for his other misdemeanours. This would not in the smallest degree help Father Christopher, but it would be a fine thing to do.'

'And what did Basil answer?'

'He wrote a letter to the Emperor, telling the whole story, and pledging his honour to go back and deliver himself up to justice, if his Majesty would sign an order for the Father's liberation.'

'My God! . . . Well?'

'I never could have believed Basil was such a fool,' continued Ivan, turning his face

to Narka, with his slow smile and his eyes brimming over with hilarity. 'What do you think he did? He guessed that, as the Prince had so many good friends in the Imperial closet, there was little chance of this letter being allowed to reach the Emperor's hands, so he confided it to the servant who had brought him the Prince's letter, and gave him a lot of money to take it to a person in St. Petersburg, who was to convey it to the Emperor. Could you have believed Basil would be such a fool?'

Ivan seemed quite to enjoy the revelation of Basil's foolishness.

'The servant did not deliver the letter?' said Narka, breathless and impatient.

'He did deliver it — to the Prince, of course.'

'Ah! . . . And what did the Prince do?'

'He put it into the fire. What else could he do?'

Narka tried to steal a deep breath unnoticed.

'I suppose,' she said, 'one could not expect he would have done otherwise.' Then, after a pause: 'Did Basil do anything after this?'

'Basil, in due course, received an answer from Prince W——, his Majesty's secretary, informing him that his august master was not deceived by his generous subterfuge for saving the life of Father Christopher; and, moreover, admitting even that this particular charge against Father Christopher was false, there were a score of others proved, some that would have hanged him had not the Imperial clemency been extended towards him for the sake of Prince Zorokoff. After this Basil gave up the game. He had played badly, luckily for himself.'

Narka, in her heart, echoed 'Luckily for himself!' But she was proud to know that Basil had done his utmost to set Father Christopher free, even at the sacrifice of his own liberty and the risk of his life. After a pause, she said:

'Do you believe that Basil shot Larchoff?'

'No, I don't,' replied Ivan.

'You think he accused himself to obtain the Father's release?'

'No, I don't.'

'Then what *do* you think?' asked Narka impatiently.

'I believe he *thought* he shot Larchoff. He told me he fired at what he took for a fox crouching behind a tree; there was a sound of something falling with a heavy thud on the dry brambles; but as it was growing dark, he did not care to grope to the spot and examine his game; he meant to tell the keeper; but when he got home he forgot all about it, and it was only when the news came of Larchoff's being found murdered that, like a flash of lightning, he saw he had shot him.'

'It looks likely enough,' observed Narka in an undertone, as if communing with herself.

'If it had been Larchoff, he would have cried out, for he was not shot dead—he did not even lose consciousness. He was sensible

to the last, and the doctor said he had been bleeding for a couple of hours, and that half an hour earlier he would still have had strength, most likely, to tell everything. It was loss of blood that did for him.'

'Then who do you suppose shot him?' inquired Narka, fixing an anxious gaze on Ivan.

Ivan's big shoulders went slowly up, and then slowly down.

'It may as likely have been Father Christopher. The wood was too dark for anyone to take aim with safety; but everybody was on the *qui vive* about the wolf, and anxious to get the reward Basil had put on the brute's head.'

'Father Christopher would not have been looking out for that; and he did not carry arms when he went on sick calls,' argued Narka dubiously.

'Not in a general way. But there was the wolf, remember. I don't want to fasten it on Father Christopher,' Ivan continued, turning his candid glance on her; 'I only want to

prove that it was as likely to be his doing as Basil's. I did my best to make Basil see this, but he will have it that his bullet hit Larchoff. And he accuses himself of having killed Father Christopher, as well as Larchoff, by not acknowledging the accident at once. If I had not come in the nick of time, he would have been off to St. Petersburg, and given himself up as a prisoner.'

'Oh!' Narka exclaimed with a shudder, 'that *would* have been madness!'

'Stark madness, and without compensation of any sort. In the first place, he would not have released Father Christopher; and in the next place, he would have ruined Princess Sibyl, and probably the Prince; the property would have been confiscated, and the sin of the son would most likely have been visited immediately on the father. But I had hard work to make Basil see this.'

'But you did make him see it?'

'Yes, I finally did.'

'How did you hear all about the mis-

carriage of his letter ?' Narka asked—'about the forged answer sent from the Emperor ?'

'Not forged—false ; the letter *was* written by Prince W——. Prince Zorokoff told me the story himself when I went to him to St. Petersburg with a letter from Basil.'

It apparently did not occur to Ivan that there was anything shameful in the systematic trickery of the Prince, or in his, Ivan's, making himself a tacit accomplice in it. To Narka it was a genuine satisfaction, an intense relief, to learn that Basil had endeavoured to undo the wrong he had done, and to feel at the same time that Ivan and the Prince stood between him and any future rash promptings of honour, or remorse.

'Are you going to make any stay here ?' she asked.

'No ; I leave to-morrow morning.'

'You are not likely to see Basil soon again ?'

'I shall see him at Easter. By the way, he gave me a letter for you,' Ivan said

casting about for his pocket-book, as if it were by chance he had remembered it.

'And to think of your not telling me that at once!' said Narka, as he handed her the precious letter.

'I had more to tell you than Basil has put in his letter; that I'll swear to,' replied Ivan good-humouredly. 'Are you going? Won't you wait to read it?'

'No; it has waited so long, it can wait till I get home.' Narka was not going to open that letter before him, and run the chance of betraying herself. 'Give my love to Sophie,' she said, 'and ask her to write to me. Or write to me yourself, and give us news of her; that will be better.'

Ivan accompanied her downstairs, and assisted her into the sleigh, and stood watching her as it drove down the avenue, and disappeared along the road.

CHAPTER XIII.

NARKA'S OATH.

NARKA went straight home, and hurried up to her room, locked the door, and took out Basil's letter. It was not a long one. This is what he said :

'You have not misunderstood my silence. It was safest for you, and you are my first care in life. It was enough for each of us to know that the other was well. Don't lose heart. The time will not be long, please Heaven! Let this hope sustain you, as it does me. Every day I remember our last moments together. I am yours for ever, through life and death.'

It was a cold love-letter. But Narka read between the lines all that she wanted to see written there, and the very absence of any terms of endearment had in it a strength of assurance that satisfied her. It surprised her a little that Basil should not have confided the truth about their mutual relationship to Ivan ; but she quickly reminded herself that this contrast between his reserve towards a true and devoted friend, and his absolute trust in her was only a new proof of his whole-hearted love. 'And so have I loved you all my life,' he had said to her, when he was placing his mother's ring on her finger. And the memory of those words thrilled Narka with such a great joy, that, for the moment, fear, doubt, anxiety, every feeling but perfect trust and secure happiness in his love, gave way. What could Sibyl and Marguerite and all the world together do against that love which had grown with his growth, and was strong enough to make him trample pride and every worldly interest underfoot ? Narka kissed the letter tenderly, put it into

her pocket, and made herself ready to go downstairs.

By the time she had taken off her things, she was calm enough to meet her mother, and tell her of the unexpected meeting with Ivan, and the good news of his having seen Basil. This gave them enough to talk about for the rest of the day. Narka's spirits had risen suddenly to overflowing gaiety, and when that evening she sat down to the piano, Madame Larik could not have compared her voice to the crying of a soul in Purgatory. It sounded more like the singing of one of the blessed in heaven, so thrilling was its jubilation, so melting sweet its pathos, filling the whole house with melody, as the song of the bird overflows its cage and floods the surrounding air with music.

And yet, for all she was so happy, Narka slept uneasily that night. She had lain down full of sweet thoughts of Basil; but when she fell asleep she dreamed a dreadful dream about him. He came to fetch her, she thought, and they drove away together; the

sleigh flew over the snow for miles and miles; at last they stopped at a stone house standing in the wilderness, with miles of snow stretching round on every side. Basil got out of the sleigh, and lifted her in his strong arms into the low-roofed house, and kissed her, and disappeared. Then she found herself alone with a man in a black mask, and wearing the uniform of the police; he stood looking at her in silence through the holes of his mask, until the silent stare made her blood run cold; at last he slowly removed the mask, and she beheld the dead face of Larchoff. The horror of the sight awoke her.

It was not much to be wondered at that the emotions of the day should have been followed by a disturbed night; but this dream was so vivid that it left her nervous for some time after she awoke.

She dressed herself quickly, and went down to make the coffee, which she always carried up to her mother in bed. As she passed the entry into the little parlour there

was a ring, and presently the maid ushered in a man wearing the hated uniform of the police.

'You are Narka Larik?' he said, with the abrupt directness of a person whose business can dispense with formality.

'Yes, I am Narka Larik.'

'You are in correspondence with Prince Basil Zorokoff?'

'No, I am not.'

'You are kept informed of his plans, and he left papers in your keeping.'

'He left me nothing, and I know nothing of his plans,' Narka answered, meeting the sharp scrutiny of the police officer without quailing.

He seemed staggered, she thought, by her confident bearing.

'Will you swear to that?' he demanded.

'I am not in the habit of swearing,' she replied with quiet hauteur; 'to those who know me my word suffices.'

'But to those who do not know you it does not suffice,' observed the officer; and he

drew from his pocket a long flat case, opened it, and discovered an image of St. Nicholas. 'Swear upon that,' he said, holding it out to her; 'swear by the blessed St. Nicholas that you have not in your possession any papers belonging to Basil Zorokoff.'

For one moment Narka hesitated. For one moment conscience staggered back from the dreadful consummation; her tongue was held, as the murderer's finger is held on the trigger before he pulls it; red lightnings danced before her; then everything was a blank. She laid her hand on the icon, and said:

'*I swear it!*'

The officer deliberately closed the case and put it back into his pocket.

'Another time I will take your word,' he said with a cruel smile. 'You have perjured yourself, and you are my prisoner. Come!'

CHAPTER XIV.

SIBYL'S MANŒUVRES.

THE de Beaucrillons were at Naples. M. de Beaucrillon had gone for a cruise in a friend's yacht, and Basil, who was staying at an hotel close by, had come to accompany Sibyl and Marguerite in their afternoon ride. Just as the party were about to start, however, Sibyl was seized with a shivering fit, and said she had taken a chill, and would stay at home. Marguerite declared she did not in the least mind giving up the ride, and was quite ready to stay with her; but Sibyl scouted the notion of this, and insisted on her going for her ride with Basil. Marguerite, reluctant

to leave her, and shrinking a little from the long *tête-à-tête* with Basil, gave in, as everybody did to Sibyl, and the two set out together.

Sibyl watched them from the window as they mounted and rode away, and said within herself, impatiently, 'If he has any sense, he will have decided his own future and Marguerite's before I see them again.'

Basil suspected that the chill had been invented in order to provide him precisely with this opportunity, and it annoyed him. Sibyl had done her utmost to induce him to pay his court to Marguerite, and cure her of the silly delusion about her call to be a Sister of Charity; but Basil had positively refused to make any such attempt. 'If she has set her heart on a grand ideal,' he said, 'I am not such a fop as to imagine I could turn her from it by making love to her.'

His manner towards Marguerite was perfect —a mixture of chivalrous respect and brotherlike familiarity—and it irritated Sibyl the more, because she could not find any fault

with it. It had seemed to her, however, that within the last few days Basil showed signs of falling, unconsciously perhaps, but unmistakably, under the spell of Marguerite's charm, and she was determined to give him every opportunity of becoming hopelessly enslaved. To-day, however, the chill had been an honest chill, though it served her purpose.

But the manœuvring did not further her designs. The ride was a success as a ride, but an absolute failure as an opportunity for flirtation, or even conversation.

On returning to the hotel they found that Sibyl was in her room; she had grown rapidly worse; the doctor had been sent for, and ordered her to bed at once. She sent word that Basil was to stay and dine, and she hoped after an hour or two's rest to be better, and able to see him in the evening. This was all very clever, but Basil was not duped by it; it annoyed him, and he would have gone back to dine at his hotel if he had not been afraid it might have seemed

to Marguerite rude, or stupid. So they dined *en tête-à-tête.*

After dinner, Sibyl's maid came to say that Madame la Comtesse had a frightful headache, and could not see either of them.

Basil went away about nine o'clock. It was the end of January, but the weather was balmy as if it had been September. The sky was deep blue, and full of stars, Orion prominent, striding across the zenith with his glittering belt and his sword and his dogs. Basil wondered whether he was shining more brilliantly in the Northern skies at Yrakow than here at Naples, and whether Narka was looking at the same constellations from her window amid the snow. He thought a great deal about Narka. Since Marguerite's arrival she was seldom out of his mind. The loyalty of his nature was in arms to protect her rights from the peril of Marguerite's presence. He said to himself a score of times a day, 'Narka is a noble woman; she loves me, and I owe her my life.'

Narka might have looked into his heart all the day long and not detected one disloyal throb there. And yet, if she could have seen how sternly his honour was mounting guard over her image, it might have pained her more, perchance, than a passing infidelity, for which a warmer love would have quickly atoned.

He was loath to go indoors, the night was so glorious. He sauntered along the Chiaja, listening to the angry growl of Vesuvius, and watching the blue waters of the bay, so calm that they reflected the stars like a second sky. It was past midnight when he went back to his hotel.

Next morning, he was dawdling over his coffee, when a servant knocked at the door of his room, and said there was a gentleman outside asking to see him. Basil, surprised at so early a visit, desired him to be shown in. He uttered a loud exclamation of pleasure on beholding Ivan Gorff, grasped his hand, and pushed him into a chair, laughing and rejoicing. But Ivan, instead of

responding in his usual quiet way, remained ominously silent.

'What is the matter?' said Basil, in quick alarm. 'My father?'

'He is well. I saw him four days ago. But there is other trouble. Narka Larik is in prison.'

Basil sprang to his feet with a cry, and then dropped back into his chair.

Ivan told the story that we know.

'It was a providential chance that I heard of the arrest at all,' he added. 'I was to have left early next morning to catch the first train from X., but I overslept, and missed it; so I went out to see the Lariks, and heard what had happened an hour before. It was pitiable to see the poor mother; she was half mad with grief. I went straight to St. Petersburg, and told the Prince. He was terribly distressed. He could not have been more shocked if Narka had been his daughter. He went off at once to the police to learn where she was, and then to the Minister, and set every engine at work.'

'Where is she?'

Ivan hesitated.

'Well,' he said, 'you will have to know: she is at Kronstadt.'

'Oh, my God!' Basil stood up, then walked the length of the room, muttering to himself: '*Kronstadt!* O God! it is too horrible. Narka! Narka! why was I born to bring this horror upon thee?'

He let himself drop into a chair, hid his face in his hands, and sobbed aloud.

Ivan waited a moment to let the first violence of his agitation spend itself before he spoke.

'You did, then, leave papers in her keeping?'

'I did—curses on me for a blind fool!' Basil, with a strong effort, mastered his emotion. 'Did the police find them first,' he asked, 'or did they force her to give them up?'

'They did neither. They turned the cottage inside out, but they found nothing; and Narka denied that she had anything be-

longing to you. She had stuck to that denial when I came away; they got nothing out of her after ten days in Kronstadt; the Prince——'

Basil put up his hand with a quick gesture, as if to stop Ivan from saying something that would be intolerable.

'I was going to say,' continued Ivan, 'that she has suffered nothing worse than imprisonment so far. The Prince has managed that, and he will keep on paying to prevent it.'

Basil drew a deep breath.

'I must at all risks go at once to St. Petersburg, and see my father, and——'

'That would be madness, and it would not help Narka,' interrupted Ivan.

'Listen,' said Basil. And he related rapidly the history of his threatened danger, his escape through Narka's assistance, and his troth plighted to her before they parted.

Ivan's round blue eyes grew rounder as he listened; but no one could have guessed that the story excited in him any stronger emotion than astonishment.

'You see, at all risks I must go,' Basil continued; 'I must go and stand by her; I must tell my father the whole truth, and ask him to come with me to the Emperor and obtain her instant release.'

Ivan laid his broad hand heavily on his friend's shoulder.

'Take care that you don't close the prison door on her irrevocably by overhaste in trying to open it. Your father is now moving heaven and earth in her interest; but do you think if he knew that as soon as she was free you meant to make her Princess Zorokoff, he would work as hard for her release? He would feel it his first duty to himself and you to leave her safe where she is. He would not go to the Emperor and sue him to liberate a low-born Jewess that she might be set up at the head of the Zorokoffs. It would be a choice of sacrificing her, or you. Do you think he would hesitate?'

'When he hears that I owe her my life?' insisted Basil; but there was more vehemence than conviction in the way he said it. The

hard logic of Ivan's reasoning fell upon him like the blows of a hammer; his whole will rose in rebellion against it, but he felt that it was stronger than his will. 'Then, in Heaven's name, what am I to do?' he cried, with the petulant despair of impotence.

'Ask Princess Sibyl to go to St. Petersburg, and throw herself at the feet of the Empress, and implore her to obtain an order for Narka's release. That is the only thing you can do that will avail. But trust me, keep your secret as close from the Princess as from your father; she is a Zorokoff, and it would be sacrilege in her eyes to set the coronet of her house on the head of a Jewess.'

Basil winced. He felt the full truth of this, and it exasperated him to find himself powerless, stopped at every turn from lifting a finger for the woman who had saved his liberty, and been herself dragged into such trials through his fault. It was like being pinioned in a strait-waistcoat and forced to look on while one dear to him was tortured.

'I will go to Sibyl,' he said, 'and you shall tell her what has happened.'

They went at once to Sibyl's house. But the valet met them at the door with a face full of alarm.

'I was coming to fetch you, Prince,' he said. 'Madame la Comtesse is very ill. Monsieur le Comte has been sent for.'

The chill had been no pretence. Sibyl was in high fever, tossing on her pillow, delirious.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CLEMENCY OF THE CZAR.

THE fever ran its course. Sibyl's life was never in actual danger, but it was six weeks before she was able to leave her room, and then nearly a month elapsed before the physicians felt they might venture to tell her of Narka's imprisonment. Even then, though Gaston broke it to her with the gentlest precautions, the shock affected her health seriously for some days.

It is not necessary to say that the proposed journey to St. Petersburg, with such excitement awaiting her at the end of it, was postponed indefinitely. The typhoid fever had

left mischief behind it, and as soon as she was strong enough to bear the fatigue she was to go to Schwalbach for the baths and waters.

All these delays were terrible to Basil. Without Ivan he could not have borne them. But Ivan was a staff to them all. He lived on the railway between St. Petersburg and Kronstadt and Naples, taking flying visits to the Crimea, where Sophie was rapidly fading away. Owing to the largess he scattered with royal generosity to the greedy wolves at the fortress, he was able to obtain many alleviations for Narka, and to convey written messages between her and her mother. He paid without counting, wherever there was a man to be bribed, or a chance secured.

Marguerite had remained with Sibyl up to the present. Her purpose was still unshaken. Basil's companionship had not made her falter; and after the severe test of many months' temptation she was more convinced than ever that Heaven called her to renounce all things for God's sake, and for the service

of the poor. Gaston, from the first, had not attempted to oppose her; and when Sibyl was pronounced strong enough to go to Schwalbach, Marguerite bade her farewell, and returned to Paris, accompanied by her brother.

The de Beaucrillons had given saints to the cloister, and heroes to every battle-field: the Church, the State, and the camp, and more than one fair virgin face, shrouded in the veil, looked down on Gaston de Beaucrillon from the walls of his ancestral home. The moment had now come for him to prove that the high courage he had inherited from a knightly race had not degenerated. He loved his young sister with the tenderest affection; but when the day came, he went with her to the Rue du Bac, and in that whitewashed *parloir* that has so often seen enacted the humble but divine drama of a life's sacrifice, the brother and sister kissed and parted.

Then M. de Beaucrillon rejoined his wife.

Prince Zorokoff was working in Narka's

behalf with a zeal that did credit to his heart ; but, as his family well knew, this particular exercise of zeal was precisely what best suited his taste and capacity. The atmosphere of a court was to him as the very breath of heaven ; he was in his element in the midst of its intrigues and ambitions ; the splendid and awful chances which made life under the eye of a despot a standing lottery, where the prizes were wealth and titles, and honours and miraculous rescues, and the blanks torture, captivity, exile, and death, were to this loyal Muscovite exhilarating as wine.

He was impatient for Sibyl to come and play her part in the present drama, and exert her influence with the Empress, which would be creditable to him as well as serviceable to Narka. Finding, at last, that in spite of his urgent appeals, M. de Beaucrillon insisted on his wife's carrying out the doctor's injunctions, without sacrificing one bath, the Prince resolved to act on his own unaided resources, and to entreat the Empress himself.

'Our sovereign's birthday is approaching,' he wrote to Sibyl, 'and I will petition her on that occasion for Narka. Her Majesty delights to bestow happiness at all times, but more especially does she love, in her adorable goodness, to make this auspicious anniversary a day of consolation to the sorrowful, and of rejoicing for all her subjects.'

Nothing in Russian life and character puzzled M. de Beaucrillon so much as this servile worship of the Czar. The abject tone used by a proud nobleman like Prince Zorokoff in speaking of the despot who destroyed, or destituted, human beings with no more compunction than the mower cuts down the poppies in drawing his scythe through the grass, was a mystery that Gaston gave up trying to solve. So inveterate was the habit of slave-like homage in the Russian mind, that even when writing to his own daughter the Prince's language was as sycophantic as if he were addressing his imperial master in person, or speaking to a brother courtier who might repeat his words. And the way Sibyl

acquiesced in her father's blind adoration was still more incomprehensible.

The autocratic *régime* had, however, its redeeming point—it was exciting, it was fruitful in emotions. They were generally of a painful kind, but a joyful one was just now in reserve even for Gaston. Sibyl had nearly completed her course of baths at Schwalbach, and was making ready to set out for St. Petersburg, when she received a letter from her father saying that the Emperor had pardoned Basil, and appointed him Chamberlain to the Empress ; whilst the Empress, on her side, had implored and obtained Narka's release. The Prince was on the point of starting with Ivan Gorff for Kronstadt with the order for her immediate liberation, and they would then convey her back to Tante Nathalie at Yrakow.

Sibyl's joy was only equalled by her gratitude.

'I always felt certain that the Emperor would grant both petitions if they were properly presented to him,' she said, crying

and laughing with delight. 'Our sweet Empress! our grand, magnanimous Emperor! May their goodness bring down every blessing on their heads!'

She clasped her hands, and raised her drowned eyes to heaven in devoutest supplication.

M. de Beaucrillon was going to retort, but he shut his lips tight, with a widening grimace expressive of determination to keep them shut. He was too thankful for the cause of these ardent benedictions to sneer at his wife's loyal effusions; but what, in the name of justice and common-sense, had Narka done to call forth this gratitude to the Emperor for having ordered her to be let out of prison? Basil had misbehaved himself, though how far his misconduct deserved the severe punishment which had overtaken him, and the still severer fate that he had escaped, had never been explained; but Narka on some vague suspicion had been thrown into a dungeon, and kept there five months, although the active researches of the police

had failed to produce anything to substantiate the smallest charge against her. And because she was now liberated, the heavens were to break and rain down dew upon the heads of the sweet Empress and the magnanimous Emperor! Truly it was strange to see Sibyl, the child of a freeborn French mother, so completely the victim of inherited paternal blindness as to invest the caprice of an irresponsible tyrant with the character of divine clemency.

It was a great relief in every way that the journey to St. Petersburg was given up. M. de Beaucrillon felt as if he had himself been let out of prison when he set his face toward France, with the prospect of respite, for a time at least, from those sudden catastrophes and hair-breadth escapes which made life within breathing distance of a Russian atmosphere a constant gasp and strain.

CHAPTER XVI.

TIDINGS FROM BASIL.

A YEAR had gone by since Narka's release and Basil's restoration to imperial favour. In that interval many things had happened. Madame Larik and Sophie Gorff had died, Sibyl had become a mother, and Marguerite de Beaucrillon had passed her novitiate, and put on the gray gown and white *cornette* of a Sister of Charity.

Narka, after her mother's death, left Yrakow and went to Koenigsberg, where some old friends of her mother's resided. She took with her nothing but her books and a few little household gods, and her piano—Sibyl's gift to her before her marriage. So

long as her mother lived she had accepted Prince Zorokoff's generous kindness; but once alone, she refused to remain a pensioner on his bounty, and went to Koenigsberg, resolved to support herself by giving lessons in singing.

She and Basil had not met. His request for a passport and short *congé* to go and see his sister was met by a peremptory refusal, and an intimation that he had better not repeat the demand for at least a year. He chafed, but submitted. Rebellion was useless. He corresponded regularly with Narka, and though his letters were guarded in their expressions, Basil being, as he was aware, under close surveillance, he was able to make her feel that she was his chief object in life. He was bitterly distressed at not being able to repay her even a portion of his debt; but the Prince never had a rouble to spare; he was hard set to find money for his own extravagant expenses, and to supply Basil with the means of keeping up the costly decencies of his position at Court. He kept him, in

fact, like a schoolboy, allowing him to run up what bills he liked, but never giving him any money.

Narka was, however, so far, in no straits. She had a little sum from the sale of her furniture to start with, and she had found pupils enough to keep her moderate wants supplied. The separation from Basil was her great trial. Yet, though she suffered, she was far from unhappy. She loved him, and she believed undoubtingly in his love for her. She was therefore like one only kept waiting at the gate of Paradise, and soon to be admitted to its lovely shade and sweet-scented alleys.

Basil's plan was by patience to disarm all suspicion of his purpose, and then obtain a passport under pretence of going to see Sibyl; once free, he would marry Narka, and trust to his father's forgiving him. It was a vague enough plan, but it was the only one that held out any hope of accomplishing their union; so Narka was content to abide by it, keeping her heart quiet with blissful dreams of

the future that each day drew nearer to her.

Sibyl had written affectionately, offering her a home after Tante Nathalie's death; but Narka had refused to accept it. She preferred, and she knew that Basil preferred, that she should remain independent of Sibyl for the present. She gave, however, as a reason for her refusal that she hoped to find a centre of work very easily at Koenigsberg, and that for a time at least it would be better for her to be occupied, and amidst new scenes and people. Sibyl assented; and agreed that change of association and work might, indeed, be the best thing for her, after all that she had gone through. Narka ought to have been satisfied; but so inconsistent is human nature that it sent a pang through her heart to see Sibyl acquiescing in her reasons, instead of contradicting and trying to overrule them.

So life seemed to have settled down into a very narrow groove for poor Narka. Sibyl, evidently, could live without her. There was no outlook anywhere, except that solitary

one towards the golden gate of Paradise, and for the present this seemed blocked by a mountain of obstacles.

Not many months after her arrival at Koenigsberg, an important event occurred: Sibyl's baby was born. Nothing could be more charming than her manner of announcing the joyful event to Narka. 'I feel,' she wrote, 'as if my joy in him would not be complete until I see my baby in your arms, dear Narka. Ah! does the future hold in reserve for me the delight of holding *your* baby in *my* arms? I believe it does, ma chérie. I believe that all the sorrow that has gone before was a preparation for some great happiness in store for you.'

Narka read the letter many times over. Did Sibyl guess? Or was it her own overflowing happiness that made her prophetic?

Life seemed now, indeed, a perfect joy for Sibyl, and her letters were electric in their communication of it. The baby was a little magician whose wand made everything beautiful. When in due course he per-

formed the seemingly unparalleled feat of lisping his mother's name, the wonder was that things went on as usual, that the sun rose and set just as if nothing extraordinary had happened. Sibyl's great anxiety was lest Narka should not see him until the glory of his infant graces had departed, and he should have passed on to another phase of intelligence and fascination. But these fears were suddenly dissipated by a prospect as unexpected as it was blissful to Narka.

She received a letter from Basil telling her that he was appointed to the post of Secretary to the Russian Embassy in Paris, and was to enter on his new duties in about three months. Prince Krinsky, the newly named Ambassador, had asked for him, alleging that Basil's thorough knowledge of European languages would make him a valuable auxiliary, and that he knew no other young man so suitable for the post.

'My father is very pleased,' wrote Basil, 'though the appointment will cost him a lot

of money. He has, however, found means of raising it at once, and has been so generous that I am able to send you two thousand roubles, which the bearer of this letter will hand you in German money. You will go, immediately on receiving it, to Paris, and there await my arrival. Sibyl will want you to go to her; but I prefer that you should not. We will make her understand the reason soon. I am in hopes that things will favour us more readily than I had dared to expect. Of course there will be a great row. But the Empress is really kind, and I count on her support to bring round my father. That done, we shall have no more trouble. The Fates seem as if they were going to be good to us at last.

'I have written to Ivan to go and accompany you to Paris. He will find a nice lodging for you, and make you feel less lonely on arriving in the strange place. Sibyl is at Biarritz, which is just as well, under the circumstances.

'*Au revoir* soon, my own beautiful Narka.

'BASIL.'

Narka could hardly believe that this wonderful news was true. Three short months, and Basil would meet her and make her his wife! Gladly would she have started that same hour for Paris, so eager was she to obey him, and to find herself in the city where he appointed to meet her; but it is only people in the story-books who can follow instantaneously the dictates of their will, and put into execution a plan the moment it is formed. Some few arrangements were necessary before breaking up her little temporary home, and a week must elapse before she could possibly leave Koenigsberg. Meantime, she must write to Sibyl and announce her intended departure. Her heart beat with a new delight at the thought of meeting Sibyl, of the welcome she would receive from her.

Singing and smiling to herself, Narka sat down to write. It was only when she took the pen in her hand that she remembered it was impossible for her to give the true reason of this sudden resolution of going to live

in Paris. And yet it was absolutely necessary to give some reason. She rested her chin in her hand, and sat turning the pen in her fingers, considering what she could say. It did not much matter what reason she gave, provided it was a plausible enough one to satisfy Sibyl for the moment. After long deliberation, she determined to say that people who knew assured her that her talent would find much wider scope and larger remuneration in Paris, and that she had finally made up her mind to follow this indication, which coincided with the longings of her own heart, and come and live within reach of her dear Sibyl's companionship. Narka's conscience pricked her as she wrote this made-up story; but the next moment she laughed at her scruples.

'I will tell her the truth soon enough,' she said to herself, 'and, meantime, I must do what Basil wishes.'

By return of post she received an answer from Sibyl. With a pleasant flutter at her hungry heart, Narka opened the violet-scented

envelope with its delicate gold cipher, all so suggestive of Sibyl, and read :

'Oh, my Narka, what a wonderful surprise this is! What a delight it will be to clasp you to my heart, and gaze into those beautiful eyes that have been like two fountains of love and sympathy to me all my life! And then the pleasure of seeing my boy in his aunt Narka's arms, learning to love her and tyrannize over her! But, my precious one, have you sufficiently weighed the risks you run in leaving your present home for a great wilderness like Paris? It is quite true, your glorious voice and your rare musical genius would in time secure you both fame and fortune; but you must first be known, and it is very uphill work in this great Paris for a stranger to become known. I hear and see a good deal of this kind of struggle, and many a time when I have been watching the disappointments and heart-sinkings of a young artist, the thought of you has brought the tears to my eyes, and I have thanked God that

you were spared the misery of having to fight the battle of life under such cruel conditions. For though lessons are no doubt paid much more highly here than in Koenigsberg, the necessaries of life also are very much dearer.

'Darling, I feel it is kinder to tell you all this before you take a step which may lead to bitter regret. Of course, if you still decide on coming, I can only rejoice selfishly for my own sake, seeing you will be like a breeze of sweet air from Yrakow.

'Ever thine own,

'SIBYL.'

If Narka had been asked what effect this letter produced on her, she would have likened it to a sudden chill. Yet there was no stint of tender expressions in it from first to last, and it was perhaps inevitable that Sibyl, who was the most unpractical of human beings, should be scared at the idea of one like Narka coming to try her fortune in a place like Paris. Sibyl only realized two

manners of existence: her own, gliding smoothly through broad, flowering meads, and that of the people, sweating and toiling to keep her chariot-wheels well oiled; she had no practical knowledge of any intervening states. Narka repeated these reasons to herself, and tried to take comfort in dwelling on the caressing endearments that were sprinkled through Sibyl's letter, like dewdrops over the dry dust of her cold, repelling arguments.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEETING WITH MARGUERITE.

IVAN GORFF arrived punctually at Koenigsberg, and proved the kindest and most efficient escort. He was one of those rare persons whose entire simplicity and selflessness make you feel perfectly at ease; his companionship imposed no effort; he exacted nothing; he only asked to be made use of. Narka, who had never cared much for him, suspecting rightly that he cared too much for her, had grown quite fond of him by the end of the *tête-à-tête* journey. It was like having a strong, sagacious dog always by her side, on the *qui vive* to do her bidding, never

expecting thanks, but radiantly happy when she threw him a bone in the shape of an affectionate smile, or a kind word. He never alluded to her relationship to Basil, but it was borne in upon her that he was aware of it.

On arriving in Paris, he found her very pretty lodgings in the Rue Chaillot, with a salon that overlooked gardens, and beyond them the river. Ivan thought them expensive, but he made no observations; that was her affair.

Narka was soon at home in her new abode. She had that gift peculiar to some women of making beautiful any place where she dwelt. Her rooms were very simply furnished, but her grand Pleyel piano, covered with its Turkish cloth, a rich piece of Muscovite embroidery in gold and silver and many-coloured silks, gave an air of splendour to the salon; flowers and plants set on every available spot lent it an aspect of refinement, and books spread about on the tables suggested that intellectual interest which was

never absent where Narka was. She took pains to make the rooms attractive. Basil was to meet her here, and as the frame sets off the picture, so would she borrow some additional charm from the help of harmonious surroundings.

Sibyl had not said a word to her of his nomination to the Russian Embassy.

'She means to let it come on me as a great surprise,' thought Narka, with a pleasant consciousness of being herself much deeper in Basil's secret.

Sibyl's absence from town at this juncture was rather a relief; but Narka was impatient to see Marguerite, and her first expedition was to the Rue du Bac. She learned, to her disappointment, that Sœur Marguerite had been sent to Havre a month ago, and it was quite uncertain when she would return.

Narka found herself, consequently, as much alone in Paris as if she had strayed into the Sahara; for Ivan Gorff, as soon as he had done everything that was within his power for her, went back to Russia.

The weather was intensely cold ; the winter was an exceptionally severe one ; and Narka now understood Sibyl's apparently incredible assertion that in Paris the cold was more cruel than in Russia. In Russia you were protected against it by thick walls, and fires that were like furnaces ; but here in Paris the wind that blew with a shrill blast from the north pierced the thin walls, too porous to keep it out, and whistled through chinks in the doors and windows, until it seemed to blow as hard indoors as out. Narka, who had not yet found out what a costly luxury a good fire was in Paris, piled on the logs in her three rooms unsparingly. She spent her time between singing and reading and dreaming, and fought against the cold with a blazing hearth.

So one month sped away. She was at the piano one morning, singing a Russian ballad, when the door of the salon opened, then closed. Narka took no notice, thinking it was Eudoxie, her *bonne*, with the newspaper; but when she finished her song, some one

cried, 'Brava! brava!' and, before she had time to turn round, two arms were hugging her backward, and a face under a stiff white headgear was pressed against hers.

'Marguerite!' Narka stood up, and returned the caress with genuine delight.

These two had often wondered how it would be when they met: whether the memory of those last days at Yrakow, so pregnant with events which had influenced the destinies of both, would come between them like a presence. And now they met, and Marguerite was looking up into Narka's face with eyes full of wistful tenderness and unabashed simplicity, and the innocent gladness of a child. But, with that intuition which sometimes belongs to children, she saw that the memory of those days had rushed upon Narka with a kind of poignant consciousness.

'Do you know,' she said, still looking up with her bright brown eyes, 'I feel as if we were a pair of ghosts meeting in the other world!'

'We are in another world than the one we parted in,' replied Narka; 'I believe we both of us died a death at Yrakow.'

'But we came to life again, didn't we?' asked Marguerite eagerly.

'I suppose we must have,' replied Narka; 'though you don't look a bit like a person who had ever been dead and buried.'

They sat down near the fire; Narka threw on a fresh block, and made a hospitable blaze.

'How pretty your room is, and what a splendid view of the sky you have!' said Marguerite, glancing toward the windows, and round at the flowers and the homelike touches visible everywhere. Then, with a sudden change from gay to grave, 'Oh, dear Narka,' she exclaimed, 'what you have suffered since we met! Many a time I have wondered how you lived through it.'

'Yes, it is wonderful what we can live through, some of us. I must be very hard to kill, I suppose.'

'That time in the prison! . . . The very thought of it turned life into a horrible dream. I used to go about my work as if I were in a nightmare. Dear, I do believe that I prayed for you with every breath I drew all those dreadful months!'

Narka's features contracted with pain; she opened her lips as if to speak, but they quivered and closed again.

After wrestling for a moment with herself:

'Perhaps it was those prayers that kept me from going mad,' she said in a low voice, 'for it was like being in hell. I never look back at it. If I did, even now it would send me out of my mind.' Then, seeing her own shuddering horror reflected in Marguerite's face: 'Let us not talk about it,' she said. 'Tell me about yourself. You look much stronger than you ever did at Yrakow, and you look so happy!'

'I *am* so happy!'

'Are you, dear? Well, I suppose the martyrs on the rack would have said they

were very happy, if the pagans had questioned them.'

Marguerite laughed.

'I can't tell what the martyrs would have said, not being one myself, any more than you are a pagan. I only know that I am as happy as the day is long.'

'And you regret nothing?'

'Nothing on this earth!'

She opened out her hands, palms upward, with an emphatic gesture.

'Yet the life you are leading is that of a common servant!' Narka said, in a tone of incredulity. 'Sibyl told me the Sisters themselves described the hardships as dreadful.'

'They exaggerated the hardships—they always do; what they never exaggerate is the happiness. I don't believe anyone in this world *could* be happier than I am. I would not exchange my lot with the most envied one on earth.'

'Thank God!' Narka murmured, almost involuntarily.

There was a moment of sudden consciousness to both, and then, by a common impulse, the two women bent forward and kissed each other.

'It is wonderful to hear you say that, Marguerite,' Narka said, as if this tacit understanding had set her free to enter frankly on the subject. 'How can you like being a peasant, and carrying burdens on your shoulders all day?'

'I love the burdens; and love, you know, makes everything light and easy.'

'Your old theory! But for all the love in the world there are things that you must miss: music that you were so fond of, and flowers that you so delighted in? How you used to revel in the winter garden at Yrakow!'

'Yes; but I don't miss anything. I am quite satisfied with the music in church on Sundays, and the canticles the children sing in the school; and I'm not sure that a hospital ward or a sick-room is not as good as a garden to me.'

Narka held up her hands.

'It all sounds so unnatural!'

'So it would be if it were not my vocation. That is what makes it natural and delightful.'

'I could understand it in a measure if all this discomfort and sacrifice on your side lessened the misery of the world,' said Narka; 'but it doesn't; it never will; the cruelty of life will remain just as universal for all your sacrifice. You will never do away with suffering.'

'God forbid! What would become of the world if suffering were done away with? There would be an end of heroism, of so much that makes life beautiful. Suffering is the salt that keeps human nature from corrupting. Besides, salt or not, it is the law, and there is no escape from it. But it is not the suffering itself that is so bad; it is the revolt against it. All the world is in rebellion against suffering, just as science is against pain. And it is a vicious circle from which there is no escaping: the more science rebels against physical pain, the more moral pain in-

creases. If people did not rebel so fiercely against it, pain would lose half its sting. Don't you think, now, for instance, that it would be much better to bear the natural pain of disease, and be content with the legitimate means of relief, than to escape from it by drugs that destroy consciousness, and end by destroying the moral strength, so that human beings are reduced to the state of animals, without nerve or reason to bear up under their suffering ?'

'You would have us all turn stoics, and, like that Spartan, stand and grin while the fox eats into our vitals ?'

'I would have us bear our pain like Christians, instead of running away from it like cowards.'

'You are behind your age, dear Marguerite,' said Narka, with a smile; 'the triumph of science is to abolish pain.'

'The triumph of charity is to alleviate it; and it is better to alleviate it with love and help than to drug it with morphine.'

'That sounds admirable as a theory,' said

Narka, with a touch of the old scorn, 'but it is a fallacy; it is like your dream of reforming the world by love. You must first call in hate; hate must clear the ground before love can build. Society, as it exists, is an organized system of murder of the majority by an omnipotent minority. That old machinery must be smashed and swept away before love can come in and raise a new order of things.'

'Hate would be a dreadful foundation to build on,' said Marguerite. 'Hate is suicidal; it destroys itself and everything else. It would be like building on a volcano. Oh, Narka, I *will* convert you into believing in love!' she exclaimed vehemently; and she laid her hand, once so dainty, now coarsened by work, on Narka's arm, and gave her an angry shake. 'What ails you that you can't believe in love?'

'I wish I could; but one can't become a child again. To ask me to believe in love as the factor that governs the world is like asking me to believe in the fairies.'

'How strange!' Marguerite murmured. 'Not to believe in love is like not believing in God: for God is love.'

'Your God, perhaps.'

'Oh, Narka! . . . Then tell me, if God gave you happiness—that is, everything you desire—would that make you believe in Him, in His goodness?'

'I suppose it would help me. Everybody is a better Christian for being made happy.'

Marguerite threw up her hands, and burst out laughing.

'What theology! Did you ever read of a saint who was sanctified by having everything his own way? For that is what you understand by happiness? Oh, Narka, what a dreadful doctrine! Why, surely you know as well as I do that suffering is the road to God; that the more we suffer, the greater our likeness to our Lord Himself?'

'In that case I am as like to Him as any saint ever canonized!' said Narka, with a ring of passion in her voice; 'for I have suffered as much as any saint you pray to.

But it hasn't sanctified me; not that I know of, unless, perchance, it be part of divine justice to make suffering meritorious, without consent or merit in the sufferer.'

Marguerite was silent a moment.

'I'm not sure, but it may be so,' she said musingly. 'I sometimes think that the mere condition of suffering has a saving power of its own.'

She remembered Narka's father and brother cruelly murdered, her mother's heart broken, and then that dungeon that was 'like being in hell.' She could not argue with wounds like these. Neither, perhaps, would God. A great poet says, 'Aimer, c'est la moitié de croire.' It would have been nearer the truth if he had said, 'Souffrir, c'est la moitié de croire.'

'Are there no pleasures at all in your life?' Narka asked irrelevantly.

'No pleasures? Why, everything is a pleasure! It was an intense pleasure just now to see a sick child gobble up a pudding I had made for it. I committed gluttony by proxy

looking at it. I must tell you,' she said confidentially, and assuming an air of innocent self-importance, 'I have developed quite a genius for cooking. My puddings and *tisanes* are in great request, and I have invented a poultice that is the delight of all our rheumatic old women.'

Narka was amused, and in her secret soul a little disgusted. She could sympathize, at least intellectually, with the sublime ambition that aimed at revolutionizing the world by love, but she could not enter into the glory of making slops and poultices. It was disenchanting to see Marguerite's grand vocation degenerate into such performances, to see her gifts and graces lowered to such vulgar service.

'You are not a bit changed, Marguerite,' she said, observing her curiously; 'always the same funny mixture of the natural and the supernatural. You supernaturalize everything without growing the least supernatural yourself.'

'Indeed, I should hope not!' Marguerite

laughed merrily. 'I should frighten the wits out of my poor people if I turned supernatural. But you must come to see me. I want to show you to Sœur Jeanne, our Sœur Supérieure, and to let you see the schools and everything. You *will* come, won't you ?'

'Of course I will, dear,' said Narka, amused at her earnestness.

'I have heard nothing about your plan of life, dear Narka, or what you are busy with ?'

'I have been busy doing nothing, so far,' said Narka, a little embarrassed how to explain her life of idleness and apparent ease ; 'I feel as if I were lying half asleep in a boat that had drifted into port after a storm.'

'Let yourself drift ; when you resume work, you will be all the better for having taken a rest. Of course you must wait, anyhow, till Sibyl finds pupils for you ?'

'I don't see how I am to find them by myself,' Narka answered evasively.

She would have gladly spoken out, and

told everything, for there was that in Marguerite which invited confidence and inspired absolute trust; and at this juncture her sympathy would have been delicious. But Narka remembered Basil's desire for secrecy yet a little while, and was silent.

Basil's name had not been mentioned, nor Father Christopher's. Many things had not been mentioned that both longed to speak of; but they kissed and parted, content to leave unspoken things that were unspeakable.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MEETING WITH SIBYL.

IN the middle of January, Sibyl returned to town. She sent to Narka the day after her arrival, asking her to come that afternoon and see her.

Narka's heart beat fast as she crossed the court of the Hôtel de Beaucrillon, while the bell clanged loudly to announce her visit. A glow of hospitable warmth embraced her in the hall; palms and flowering plants spread a fragrance around that completed the illusion of a summer climate in midwinter, and her step fell softly on the thick pile of the scarlet carpet as she ascended the wide staircase,

where ancestors of the de Beaucrillons looked down on her on either side in armour and hoops and wigs. One glance from the threshold showed her the whole aspect of the boudoir, whose folding-doors stood open : the pale blue velvet hangings, the Aubusson carpet, the crystal bowls and vases filled with flowers, and amidst these luxurious surroundings Sibyl reclining on a couch.

With a scream of delight, Sibyl jumped up and flew with outstretched arms to embrace her friend. She clasped her, and kissed her again and again with every expression of endearment. The excitement of the meeting, the joy of being thus welcomed by Sibyl, by Basil's sister, had flushed Narka, and the pink glow, delicate as a sea-shell, gave a peculiar brilliancy to her blue-black eyes, now liquid with tender emotion.

'My Narka!' Sibyl exclaimed in fond delight ; and, laying her hands on Narka's shoulders, she put her gently from her to get a better view of her ; 'you are positively more beautiful than ever! And, oh,

darling, after all you have gone through, I dreaded to find your beauty quite destroyed!'

Narka grew suddenly pale, and a tremor of the lips warned Sibyl that she must not touch that wound.

'And your baby?' Narka said, looking round as if she expected to find the little creature somewhere amongst the flowers.

Sibyl struck a gong, and in a minute there entered a large, blooming Bourguignonne with a marvellous head-gear, carrying a bundle of white muslin and pink ribbons. Sibyl seized the bundle, and with a pretty gesture of bestowal, placed it in Narka's arms. It was a delicious baby, just now moist and scarlet from its sleep, but not a bit cross; it crowed and gurgled to Narka, and let itself be cuddled and kissed without struggling away, as is the habit of babies. Narka was satisfactorily enthusiastic over the paragon, and Sibyl was radiant. But the baby, having played its part, intimated a wish to retire, and had to be carried away. Then M. de Beaucrillon was inquired for,

and Sibyl's health discussed, and every obvious question asked and answered, and the two friends found themselves face to face, conscious as people are who are full of feelings they must not betray, and of thoughts they must not put into words.

'Dear Narka,' Sibyl began, throwing back her lace sleeves, and clasping her hands, 'I have a wonderful piece of news to tell you; it is about Basil.'

'Ah!' said Narka, and she blushed.

'Oh, good news,' Sibyl added quickly; 'he is coming to Paris, and—he is going to be married!'

Narka said 'Ah!' again, accompanied by a pantomime of surprise.

'Yes. Poor Basil! after all the worry he has gone through, he is going to be happy at last. You remember Marie Krinsky, who used to take dancing lessons with us at St. Petersburg? She was four years younger than either of us, so we did not much notice her; she is now nearly eighteen, a dear little thing, pretty, accomplished, and her fortune

is enormous. This is a great blessing, for, with all the drains he has on himself, my father can't do much during his life for Basil.'

'And they are engaged?' said Narka, speaking calmly.

'Not yet officially; but he made his court at St. Petersburg, and my father spoke to Prince Krinsky, who was delighted, and immediately asked that Basil might be appointed secretary to the Embassy here. The Empress was very unwilling to part with him; but when she heard of the marriage she at once consented, and was most kind. As to the Emperor, he could not have been kinder if Basil had been a member of the imperial family. I am so happy I can hardly believe it is all real.'

A valet brought in the tea-tray, and Sibyl, voluble and excited, sat down before it, and busied herself with the pretty preliminaries for dispensing the fragrant hospitalities of a Lilliputian silver pot.

'I have been ruminating a little plan in my

head ever since I heard this great news—that is three days ago,' she went on, popping the sugar into the cups; 'the 16th will be Marie's birthday, and I want to make a fête that day to introduce her as his *fiancée* to our friends. I wonder what would be best: a ball, or a *soirée musicale?* What do you think?'

'I am a poor judge of such things, dear Sibyl,' replied Narka.

The tone, more than the words, reminded Sibyl what a mocking sound any merry-making must have in Narka's ears; Narka, who had passed through such horrors only a little while ago, and who was still in mourning for her mother. She laid down the tiny teapot, and went over and put her arms round the girl's neck, and kissed her.

'Forgive me, my sweet one; I ought to have remembered,' she said softly.

Narka silently returned her caress. They sipped their tea, and soon Sibyl went back to the subject of Basil's marriage. This, at

least, must be interesting to Narka, and would not jar upon her.

'Marie is delightfully in love,' she said. 'It is very pretty to see how unconsciously she betrays herself. I went to the Embassy this morning, and the moment I appeared she blushed up like a red rose, and every time I mentioned Basil's name she grew scarlet. I only hope Basil is thoroughly in love with her.'

Narka had gone through many ordeals, had been trained to stand and smile while the fox ate into her flesh, but it seemed to her that her powers of self-command had never before been put to so severe a test. She did not believe a word of this engagement; of course not. It was very likely a scheme arranged by the Prince, and Basil might have played a consenting part in order to deceive him and escape; it was quite impossible there could be anything more in the story. Still, the very idea of such a scheme being on foot against her happiness was enough to make her tremble. There were tremendous

forces in league against Basil, and things that were impossible sometimes happened; treachery might accomplish what open opposition failed to do. She could not shut her eyes to the fact that Marie Krinsky might be a formidable rival, young and pretty as she was, as well as high-born, wealthy, and passionately in love with Basil. Horrible possibilities flashed through Narka's mind as she sat choking down the jealous terrors that made her feel by turns savage and sick, while Sibyl dilated complacently on the joys in store for Basil with another woman. She did her utmost to appear interested, but she only succeeded in appearing indifferent; the part of a responsive listener was beyond her; she played it badly. Sibyl saw that a barrier of some sort had risen between them; there was something the matter with Narka; there was none of the sisterly *abandon* nor the exuberant delight at their reunion that she had looked forward to. Was it that Narka was hurt to find her so elated about Basil's new happiness, instead of

being entirely occupied with the pleasure of meeting her? This was a little unreasonable; but perhaps it was natural. With the tact that she excelled in, Sibyl glided gently from Basil and Marie Krinsky to various other points of interest in her own life, and then, as if thankful to dismiss these subjects and enter on the one that was most in her thoughts, 'And now, dearest,' she said, taking Narka's hand on her knee and clasping it, 'I have told you all there is to tell about myself, and I want to hear about you.'

She put a series of questions to Narka about her health, her experience at Koenigsberg, her success there, her pupils, her singing, her present arrangements; and Narka answered them all as she could. When Sibyl heard the rent she was paying, she said 'Oh!' and bit her lip, and held it bitten, as if arrested and surprised beyond power of further speech.

'I thought it dear,' Narka remarked,

feeling very hypocritical; 'but I could not stay at the hotel. It was altogether too dear. Everything is very dear.'

'I warned you of that, chérie,' Sibyl said, letting go her underlip.

'Oh yes, you warned me; if I come to grief, I have no one to blame but myself.'

There was certainly something wrong with Narka. Sibyl felt it a relief when M. de Beaucrillon came in and cut short the *tête-à-tête.*

M. de Beaucrillon had not liked Narka at Yrakow; but he met her now with the most cordial warmth. There was more than courtesy, there was genuine kindliness, in the way he raised her hand to his lips, and held it in his firm grasp while he bade her welcome to his home.

'I called on you an hour ago, hoping to carry you back with me,' he said; 'but you had just gone out.'

Narka felt her self-respect raised by the

deferential kindness of this knightly gentleman. He called her Narka, which he had never done before.

'He will be a friend to me,' she thought, remembering how soon she might have to put his friendship to the test.

CHAPTER XIX.

SIBYL REOPENS HER SALONS.

NARKA was very miserable after this first meeting with Sibyl, that she had looked forward to so longingly. She would not confess to herself that she attached any importance to that story of Basil's engagement; still it haunted her, and poisoned her peace of mind. She could not sleep. In the middle of the night she got up and struck a light, and by way of calming herself, read over Basil's letters. They were few, and they were generally short, and always guarded in expression; cold love-letters, most lovers would have called them; but to Narka they were all-

sufficing; they were written as a man whispers when the enemy is at the door, listening to catch every word he says. This, she knew, was why he had not written now to tell her of his immediate arrival. Still, he might have contrived to make her a sign somehow. . . . Then, again, she remembered how necessary caution was at such a crisis, how fearful he must be of exciting suspicion. She took out her ring, and the sight of it seemed to rebuke and reassure her. She kissed it, and blew out her candle and went back to bed.

'I am like that woman,' she said to herself, 'who declared she did not believe in ghosts, but that she was mortally afraid of them.'

Two days elapsed. Narka was at her piano when the door opened and let in a sudden puff of violets. The violets announced Sibyl before she had time to announce herself by a joyous exclamation.

'He will be here on the 15th! In seven days! Can you believe it? Can you believe it?'

She kissed Narka, and sank down on the sofa and pulled off her gloves. The first thing Sibyl did when she wanted to talk was to pull off her gloves; those nervous, dimpled, bejewelled little hands played a great part in her discourse; they had a language of their own, without whose help much of her speech would have been incomplete.

'Narka, put on your bonnet and come off with me. I can't enjoy my happiness fully unless I have you to share it. Gaston is an angel; but he is a man; he can't understand. No one but you can sympathize with me, and feel what it will be to me to have Basil free, and married, and safe out of mischief! I have been to the Krinskys'. Marie is radiant. But we have no time to lose to get ready the soirée for the 16th. It falls on a Wednesday, which is unlucky, as that is my day. It will be a bore if he comes in the afternoon. But he will most likely arrive by the evening train. You know the 16th is Marie's birthday? I am going to Worth's to order my dress. Put on your things and

come with me. It will amuse you, dearest. Come !'

Narka did as she was told : fate seemed to be making sport of her, making her play comedy in spite of herself. She was in no mood to be amused, and yet Sibyl was right, the ordering of the dress did amuse her. It amused her to see the mobility with which her companion sprang away from Basil, and became absorbed in the question of *toilette.* It amused her to see the devout attention which the man-dressmaker bestowed on the matter. The consultation lasted half an hour, and was conducted on both sides with the gravity befitting the importance of the subject.

' Madame la Comtesse may rest satisfied ; her dress will be the event of the season,' Worth remarked, with quiet assurance, as he flung aside the costly stuffs he had been coiling and looping to illustrate his idea.

Sibyl was flushed, but cheerful and confident.

' And now, dearest,' she said, in Russian,

to Narka, 'you must order a dress;' and without giving her time to answer she turned to Worth: 'Mademoiselle is in mourning, as you see, but she wants you to make her a white dress that can be worn at a *soirée de contrat.*'

The potentate of fashion fixed his eyes on Narka, as if to take in the characteristics of line and colour that were to guide him. He called for white tissues, and proceeded to roll out velvets and gauzes round Narka as if she had been a statue. He then made notes and lines on his *carnet*, and handing it to her, 'I think, mademoiselle, something in this style will suit you?' he said.

Narka uttered an exclamation of surprise: it might have been taken from the garment she had invented for herself at Yrakow.

'It would require a little relief,' observed Worth; 'a gold buckle here on the tunic, and a clasp on the shoulder fastening the long sleeves. Would that be too great a concession to ask?'

'Not the least,' interposed Sibyl. 'Your Russian gold ornaments will suit beautifully,' she said, turning to Narka. 'You must bring them when you come to try on the dress.'

When they got out on the stairs, Narka said:

'How foolish of you, Sibyl! My white cashmere would have done perfectly. This is only a second edition of it, and will cost a hundred times more.'

'If Worth could hear you!' Sibyl's laugh rang out on the staircase. 'Nonsense! I want you to look your best. You are going to sing. I have decided for a concert instead of a ball, and it was chiefly on your account. I want you to shine out as a star to all my friends. Marie is going to sing with our cousin, Henri de Beaucrillon, and I shall have several good artists, but you will outshine them all. Mind, you are to be in splendid voice!'

They drove about giving orders at the shops for some hours. Narka had to go

back with Sibyl and spend the evening. After dinner she had to sing. Sibyl declared her voice was finer than ever; but M. de Beaucrillon remembered how that love-song at Yrakow had melted the heart in his breast, and he felt that, though the instrument was still beautiful, the passionate soul which had inspired it that night was absent, or silent.

Every day for the next six days Narka was at the Rue St. Dominique almost from morning till night. There was no escaping from Sibyl.

'I can't do without you, dearest,' she repeated; 'I want your sympathy and your calm strength to support me through this nervous time.'

Madame de Beaucrillon's house was the apex of the world in which she moved; the domestic events which had closed it for a time had been bewailed as social calamities, and the announcement that it was going to be opened on so brilliant an occasion was received with general satisfaction. Sibyl

wanted Narka to take the management of the musical programme ; but Narka refused ; she knew it would bring her into immediate, perhaps intimate, contact with Princess Marie, and there were limits to what she could bear. She was in constant terror of meeting Marie at the Rue St. Dominique ; but fortune spared her that trial, although Sibyl had made more than one appointment to introduce them. She was presented to a number of other ladies, who assured her they were 'ravished to make her acquaintance.' It would have been pleasant enough to be welcomed by these high-bred Frenchwomen if Narka had not felt that she was under false appearances. Would they have been ravished to make her acquaintance, she asked herself, had they known she was going to carry off the prize so many of them were coveting for a daughter, or a sister ?

Since that letter from the Prince, announcing Basil's arrival for the 15th, there had been no news from St. Petersburg. Narka would not own to herself that this

silence made her uneasy, that she was frightened, in fact. But she was.

On Tuesday afternoon—the day before Basil was to arrive—she was with Sibyl, when the servant brought in a telegram. It was from the Prince :

'*Expect Basil Wednesday.*'

'How delightful!' exclaimed Sibyl. 'He will come to find us all *en fête* to welcome him! If only my father had said "morning" or "evening"! It will be tiresome if he arrives in the evening, just as the people are flocking in. Dear me, how dreadful this uncertainty is!'

She moved about, and sat down, and got up again, and was fluttered and ecstatic and alarmed and impatient all in a minute.

M. de Beaucrillon thrust his hands into his pockets, and leaned against the mantelpiece, and gazed with serio-comic gravity at his wife.

'How you Russians do dramatize every crisis in life!' he said, putting his head to

one side with a movement that resembled Marguerite, and he turned to Narka. The expression of her face startled him; there was no dramatizing there—there was poignant emotion that she was straining every nerve to keep under control. What need was there for this fierce effort at self-restraint?

'There is always something about that girl that I cannot understand,' M. de Beaucrillon said within himself; and he looked away.

At Sibyl's request he took up the railway guide, and made it evident to her that Basil must come by a morning train, so that the excitement of the soirée would not be made too overpowering by the emotion of receiving him in the midst of five hundred guests. Sibyl wanted Narka to come and sleep at her house on the eve of the concert; but Narka had a series of reasons—all foolish ones, Sibyl thought—to prove that this would be a most inconvenient arrangement for her. In her secret soul she was convinced that Basil would arrive by the early train, and

come straight to her before going to Sibyl. The idea of meeting him in Sibyl's presence was too dreadful to be contemplated. She could never go through the ordeal without betraying herself. And yet, after all, she reflected, did it matter so very much? A few days, a few hours, probably, sooner or later, and the crisis must come.

And when it came, how would Sibyl meet it? This question kept perpetually recurring to Narka, and filled her with an anguish of uncertainty which even the joy of meeting Basil could not banish from her mind.

Wednesday morning dawned, and found her watching. She had been too excited to sleep. She rose feverish and unrefreshed, and spent the morning coming and going from the window. Every cab that drove up the street made her heart leap. But the early hours went by; noon came: no Basil, and no news from Sibyl.

'He will come by the evening train, and I shall have to meet him before Sibyl!' she

thought. And then a terror seized upon her, and she resolved not to go. But this panic did not last. It was quickly followed by a feeling of defiance, and a longing to let Sibyl and all the world know that she was Basil's *fiancée*, and ready to brave the whole world rather than give him up.

The day dragged heavily on till evening, and then it was time to dress. Narka coiled up her shining gold hair, and robed herself in the wonderful white draperies that Worth had combined out of soft and costly materials, and then clasped on her golden necklace and bracelets, and waited for the carriage to come for her.

As she beheld herself reflected in the long mirror of the wardrobe, her heart exulted, not from any sense of vulgar vanity—she was too proud and too chastened by sorrow for so mean a vice as vanity—but she rejoiced in her beauty for Basil's sake. 'He will be glad to see me looking well amongst other women,' she said to herself, with a soft thrill of happiness; and the flush of

love and conscious power made her cheek glow.

When she reached the Rue St. Dominique, M. de Beaucrillon had gone to meet Basil. Sibyl was dressed, and watching impatiently for the return of the brougham. Narka, though outwardly calm, was trembling with excitement.

'You will be the Queen of Beauty to-night as well as the Queen of Song, my Narka!' Sibyl exclaimed, in frank admiration, when she beheld her. 'How pleased Basil will be to find you looking so well! Come, and let us see how the rooms look lighted. It will help to pass the time while we are waiting. Stop! there is a carriage driving in.' She flew out to the landing, and called out, 'Sont-ce ces messieurs?'

The groom of the chambers answered from the hall:

'M. le Comte has returned alone, Madame la Comtesse.'

Presently M. de Beaucrillon appeared, walking leisurely up the stairs.

'What can it mean?' Sibyl asked, fluttered and vexed.

'I don't suppose it is the first time Basil has been unpunctual to an appointment,' her husband said, in his solemn way; 'the singular thing would be if he were to keep one.'

'He must have missed the train somewhere,' said Sibyl, 'unless he was taken suddenly ill; but then he would have telegraphed.'

'He is not ill, ma chère amie; I will answer for that; and he is simply your brother: the best fellow in holy Russia, but born without the faculty of keeping an appointment. Where is Narka?'

Narka, whose heart had begun to palpitate violently at the prospect of seeing Basil appear in a moment, had stood clutching the back of a chair until she heard Sibyl's exclamation of disappointment, and then, regaining her self-possession, she walked quietly on towards the landing. The effect she produced on M. de Beaucrillon was so great that she could not pretend not to see it. He

started, and for a second looked at her, positively dazzled. For the first time in her young life Narka realized that she possessed a sovereignty to which men were ready to bow down. By the time she had given him her hand, and he had raised it to his lips, as was his graceful habit with her, Sibyl had joined them; she was so agitated and full of her disappointment as to dispel the momentary bashfulness that Narka had felt under M. de Beaucrillon's unspoken admiration. There were a few moments of excited talk, Sibyl asking and answering a score of questions in one breath, and then the carriages rolled in quickly one upon another, and guests arrived in rapid succession.

Sibyl stood to receive them at the head of the stairs. Narka escaped to the music-room, but Sibyl missed her in a minute, and sent M. de Beaucrillon to bring her back. He soon captured her, for the crowd was not yet large enough to give her shelter.

'I have orders to take you, dead or alive,' he said, drawing her arm through his, and

marching her back to Sibyl. 'Must I hold you bodily in durance, or will you be my prisoner on parole?'

'I give my parole,' she said.

He bowed and released her.

The gay and brilliant crowd kept streaming in, and soon the spacious suite of salons was filled. At eleven o'clock the concert began. It opened with a fine orchestral performance; then Marie Krinsky sang her duet. This was followed by several other pieces, vocal and instrumental, and then it was Narka's turn. The suspense of the day, culminating in the disappointment at the end of it, had so excited and exhausted her that she felt incapable of singing a note; her tongue was parched, her throat felt as if it were paralyzed. When M. de Beaucrillon went up and offered her his arm, she did not move, but looked up at him entreatingly.

'I *can't* sing!' she said.

It seemed cruel to insist, but he felt sure that she could.

'Sibyl will be terribly disappointed,' he said, after a moment's hesitation.

Narka stood up. The movement, the sudden resolution, seemed to say, 'Then I will do it or die!'

She took his arm, and walked to the centre of the platform. Her cheeks were delicately flushed; her great lustrous eyes had a flame in them; her coral lips, clear cut as a cameo against the ivory skin, were parted tremulously, while an air of incomparable dignity and modesty heightened the effect of her rare loveliness. There was a profound hush through the crowded rooms; the orchestra played the opening accompaniment, and Narka lifted up her voice, and sang.

M. de Beaucrillon was right. She could sing. A few notes assured her that she had command of her instrument, and then her voice poured out like a crystal stream, rising and swelling and trilling with as little effort as a bird's. The audience were quite carried away, and when the song was over they burst into a salvo of rapturous applause.

Sibyl drifted with her serpentine grace across the platform and kissed Narka, and the other ladies, following this example, gathered about her, kissing and congratulating. All around her, people were exclaiming, 'What genius!' 'How beautiful she is!' The gentlemen were clamouring for the honour of being presented.

It was one of those moments that bring with them a kind of intoxication to the calmest and wisest. Yet there was something timid in the glance of Narka's large dark eyes that seemed to deprecate all this homage and admiration. If only Basil had been there to enjoy it and to justify it! Without him, she felt the triumph was not wholly hers; she was receiving it under false pretences.

M. de Beaucrillon was charming.

'Je suis très fière de ma belle-sœur,' he said, presenting her to a venerable duchess whose smile was social distinction in the great world.

Even in Basil's absence it was something

to have been thus welcomed by the friends to whom he would soon present her as his wife.

As she drove home, Narka was conscious that it had been a brilliant evening; Sibyl had been perfect; everybody had welcomed and admired her; and she was Basil's affianced wife.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WOMAN WHOM BASIL LOVED.

TWO days went by, and there was no news from Basil. On the morning of the third day the brougham came from the Hôtel de Beaucrillon with a message requesting Narka to come at once. Narka obeyed the summons, full of anxiety as to its meaning. She found Sibyl walking up and down the library in a state of violent though suppressed excitement.

'There! read that,' she said, drawing a letter from her pocket, and holding it out to Narka, without arresting her walk.

Narka, sick with suspense, sat down and

read the letter. It was from Prince Zorokoff. He had discovered on the very eve of Basil's departure that the boy had entangled himself in some promise of marriage to a woman of low condition, and that this had been at the bottom of his desire to get out of Russia.

'He tried to deny it at first,' wrote the Prince, 'but I put the holy image before him, and bade him swear the story was a lie. He did not dare do it, and he ended by declaring that it was true, and that he would never marry Marie K——, or any other woman but the one he loved. I said if he married her, I would curse him. I gave him three months to come to his senses and his duty. If that does not do, I will have him circumscribed under surveillance of the police at Kronstadt. The sight of the fortress will have a sobering effect.'

Narka stifled a cry, and let the letter fall on her lap.

'Well,' said Sibyl, coming up and standing before her, 'what do you say to this? The infatuated boy! It must be some woman

he met in Italy. And with a foreign woman we are powerless! She can't be a Russian, or my father would have said so. If she were Russian, it would be easy to deal with her. A threat of the knout would soon bring her on her knees!'

She shut her right hand with a quick inward movement that was too expressive to be mistaken: those soft, dimpled hands were itching for the knout to scourge the woman who had come between Basil and the pride of the Zorokoffs. Sibyl was horrible to look at; her white teeth showed between her parted lips; her words came hissing; her blue eyes glittered—they never flashed when she was excited, they glittered—her features were convulsed, her whole frame shaken with passion. Narka covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight.

'Oh, Sibyl!' she murmured.

'Yes, it is too loathsome to contemplate!' cried Sibyl, misunderstanding the gesture and the exclamation. 'Could you have believed Basil such a weak fool? If we

even knew who and where this creature is, we might buy her off. That is our only chance, as she is a foreigner. We must buy her off.'

'But if she loves Basil——' Narka ventured, hesitating.

'Love him! A creature like that! Allons donc!'

Sibyl gave a laugh that sounded devilish. She looked like an incarnate devil, or some avenging pythoness, with her glittering eyes, and her small head reared, the blue sheen of her satin dressing-gown shimmering in snake-like folds round her tall figure.

Narka could not believe her senses. Was this the Sibyl she had loved all her life and worshipped as the type of all that was good and lovable?—the Sibyl who was so tender to suffering, so generous to her peasants, so indulgent to their vices, so ready to forgive their lies and thefts and wrong-doings? What evil spirit had entered into her? And if she knew the name of the woman against whom this outburst of hate was directed, would the knowledge be a propitiation and a

relief, or would it only turn the current of her scorn and rage towards the culprit? The look of blank despair on Narka's face struck Sibyl, even in the midst of her passion.

'Oh, Narka,' she cried, 'if *you* feel this shame so keenly, think what it must be for me!' and she sank down beside Narka, and fell upon her neck, sobbing hysterically.

Narka, faint and sick at heart, waited till the storm of grief, of fury, should have spent itself. Sibyl, who knew that it was her way to be silent when she felt most deeply, was satisfied to lay her head upon that strong and tender heart, and gave vent to her own passion in floods of tears.

They had both been too much engrossed to notice the clanging of the bell, announcing a visitor. Presently the servant came in to say that the doctor was waiting to see Madame la Comtesse.

Sibyl raised her head, and wiped her eyes, and, with that mobility which was one of her characteristics, in an instant had regained complete self-possession.

'I am coming,' she said to the valet; and then, turning to Narka, 'we have been so full of this horror that I had not time to tell you baby is not well,' she said; 'I hope it is nothing serious, but I thought it better to send for the doctor. Narka, you must come and stay with me for a few days, and help me to live through the first misery of this trial. I shall die if I have not some one to help me with sympathy. Gaston is shocked, but he can't enter into my feelings. The brougham will take you home now, and you can put up what you want and come straight back. Oh!' she exclaimed, looking into the girl's agonized face, 'what should I do without you to feel for me?'

She kissed her, and hurried out of the room.

But Narka had no notion of coming back to have her own sufferings made tenfold bitterer by the sight of Sibyl's hate and anger. By the time she had driven home she was, indeed, unequal to the effort, if she had been ever so anxious to make it.

She sent a message to Sibyl saying that she had nearly fainted on getting to her own door, and must be quiet for that evening.

Poor Narka! An earthquake had come and shaken the earth under her feet since morning, and shattered her paradise to ruins. Was it possible it could be rebuilt again? Basil was now more fatally separated from her than he had ever been before; there was no chance of his escaping; the Prince would take care of that. Had the Prince any idea, she wondered, who the low woman was? And if not, would it propitiate him to hear that she was the one he had sheltered under his roof, and called his child, and rescued from a cruel captivity?

The day passed in a sort of stupor. It was only when she lay down to rest that, in the silence of the night, Narka awoke to the remembrance that, apart from the wreck of her hopes, and the blow that had crushed her heart, other trials had overtaken her which would not let her sit at home and

weep. What was she to do now? How was she to live? Practical dilemmas of many kinds surrounded her; urgent difficulties were pressing to be dealt with. She spent the night asking herself how she was to meet them; but the dawn broke and found every problem unsolved. Daylight seemed, indeed, only to magnify, by letting in a more vivid mental light upon them, the troubles that had loomed, dark enough, but still vague, during the long, sleepless night.

She must leave her present apartment, for one thing. It was much too expensive for her means and prospects now. She had been spending money freely, and her funds were running low. Where was she to find pupils? Sibyl was her only resource, and her whole soul writhed at the thought of having to depend on Sibyl. Suddenly Narka remembered Marguerite.

'I will go to Marguerite,' she said.

And she rose and dressed herself in the gray twilight of the winter's morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

MARGUERITE'S SYMPATHY.

NARKA was just starting for La Villette, when a vehicle stopped at the door. She looked out, and saw Sibyl's brougham. Before there was time to consider how she should endure this new ordeal, it was made evident that Sibyl was not in the brougham, for the footman jumped down with a note in his hand, and disappeared under the porte cochère. Presently there was a ring at the door. Eudoxie had gone out.

'I will not open,' Narka thought; 'it is no doubt asking me to go to her, and I can't go; I won't go!'

The servant rang three times, and then gave it up, and the brougham drove away. After waiting a few minutes to make sure of its being at a safe distance, Narka went downstairs.

Passing the lodge, the concierge came out and handed her a note.

'The footman rang at mademoiselle's door, but no one answered him,' said the woman.

The note was from Sibyl.

'Come to me at once, darling. I am in a sea of anguish. Baby has the small-pox! I am half mad.

'Your own

'SIBYL.'

'Poor little angel!' said Narka, with a pang. But his illness at this crisis was a boon to her, inasmuch as it would keep Sibyl away, and absorb her, and draw her mind from the woman she wished to scourge.

It was a miserable morning. The rain had been falling heavily all night; every rut

and channel was turned into a pool, and a cold drizzly rain was still falling. Narka had used cabs, and freely enough, since she had been in Paris, but the stern reign of economy which had suddenly set in reminded her that omnibuses were a cheaper mode of conveyance. She found her way to the nearest station, but it was so crowded that she had to push on to the counter for a number, and then push her way out again. An omnibus was coming up; as it slackened pace a crowd trooped after it with their umbrellas spread, looking like a whale, or some huge bird in the wake of a ship. They looked intensely ridiculous 'making tail.' Narka did not care to add her umbrella to the show; besides, she might be kept waiting an hour for a seat. Was it not better to take a cab at once? As she was balancing the question in her mind, a gentleman close to her called out:

'Will this take me to La Villette?'

'No, monsieur,' said the conductor. 'The blue omnibus there with a *correspondance*.'

The gentleman hurried away, and Narka,

with an inarticulate exclamation of thankfulness for her escape, crossed the street after him to where the blue omnibus was standing empty ; they got in almost together, and took seats opposite one another. The stranger was a tall, lean man, with a sallow complexion and marked features, carefully dressed, with a certain air of distinction. Narka more than once caught his eyes fastened upon her. It so happened that they stopped at the same place ; the stranger got out first, assisted her to alight, touched his hat, and went on his way.

Narka stood in the middle of the street, waiting for a break in the stream of carts and cabs to cross over. As she glanced eagerly right and left she descried, a little higher up, a small figure in the costume of a Sister of Charity, waiting, like herself, to cross the busy thoroughfare. There are certain situations in which even Melpomene could not look dignified ; for instance, hopping over the puddles with petticoats slightly kilted on a wet day ; and yet as Narka

watched Marguerite going through this trying performance it did not seem any more lacking in dignity than the steps and hops of a little child.

'Narka!' exclaimed Marguerite, in glad surprise, when they met on the footpath. 'How did you get here? Did you walk?'

'No; I came in the omnibus. Where are you coming from?'

'I have been to the Rue du Bac. I got an omnibus to the Madeleine, with a *correspondance*, but when I got out there was such a crowd I saw I should have to wait an hour for a place. So I started off on foot. Life is too short to be spent waiting for the omnibus. Oh, that horrid man!' she exclaimed, casting a glance full of something as near hatred as her sweet face could express at some one coming out of a shop. 'I should like to see that man flayed alive!'

Narka followed the direction of the glance, and to her surprise saw that the object of this murderous desire was the gentleman who had been her *vis-à-vis* in the omnibus.

'Who is that man?' she asked, as the stranger passed them.

'He is a Prussian; his name is Dr. Schenk. He stole away our dear old dog, Tempête, and put him to death. Nobody saw him doing it, so we could not attack him; but there is no doubt he did it. His business is to bribe little boys—our boys—to catch dogs that he tries experiments on. He ties them down, and cuts them up, and tortures them alive. He is a fiend!'

'He is a surgeon, I suppose,' said Narka; 'he does it in the interest of science.'

'Nonsense! How can you talk like that, Narka? It is pure wickedness, and he is a bad, cruel man.'

'I don't want to defend vivisection; I loathe it,' said Narka; 'but it is necessary for science.'

'Then science is wicked; it is of the devil, and ought to be done away with. It is getting to be the curse of the world.'

'What a little mediæval bigot you are!' laughed Narka.

'Am I? Well, I don't care. It makes my heart burn when I think of our poor gentle old Tempête, and I hate your cruel science that tortures our dumb fellow-servants. I think a person who invents a good poultice to relieve a poor aching body of man or beast is a greater benefactor than the man who invents how to blow up ships, or finds out secrets by torturing live dogs.'

'Then you care more for dogs than for human beings?'

'I care more for any dog alive than for that man Schenk.'

They were close by the house now. A carter came round the corner showering blows on a powerful horse that was straining and panting under a load of stones.

'Oh, why do you beat him like that?' Marguerite cried piteously. 'Poor beast, he is doing his best! If you drive him so hard he will drop!'

'He's got to drop some day, like the rest of us,' retorted the man, not ill-humouredly.

'Mais tranquillisez-vous, ma sœur ; he hasn't got a soul to save.'

'How do you know whether he has or not?' demanded Marguerite, and she laid her rough little gloveless hand on the quivering flank of the animal. The meek, strong creature turned his head towards her, and a glance from his drooping eyes seemed to thank her. She watched the man out of sight to make sure he did not begin the blows again.

'I sometimes think those dray-horses may be angels in disguise,' she said; 'they have such a patient look in their faces.'

As they entered the house, the children were being let loose from class into the play-ground. The rain had ceased, and the paved court was dry.

'I am just in time!' said Marguerite; 'I am on guard during the play-hour. You won't mind staying out-of-doors? We can sit down. I will just fetch my knitting.'

She ran into the house, and returned in a moment. Her appearance was the signal for

a general assault from the children. There must have been nearly three hundred of them, Narka reckoned at a glance, and they all shouted and gathered round Marguerite, full of discourse of the greatest importance. They caught her by the sleeve, they clutched at her gown, they elbowed and fought to get close enough to attract her attention. Marguerite bore the onset quite unfluttered, and in some mysterious way satisfied the whole flock in a minute and a half, and sent them off to their play.

The two friends sat down in a sheltered spot; but they were hardly seated when a scream from the other end of the court sent Marguerite flying off again. A small child had been knocked down by a companion twice its size, and was proclaiming in lusty yells that it was badly hurt. Marguerite picked up the toddler, and kissed it and made it well, and then with a sharp rebuke sent the delinquent to stand with her face to the wall.

'Now let us have a quiet talk,' she said, coming back to Narka.

'There is not much chance of quiet with this population of orphans to keep in order,' said Narka, disappointed, and a little chilled.

'They are not all orphans,' corrected Marguerite, as if the point must be of interest to Narka; 'there are not more than thirty of them orphans, unfortunately. I mean the parents are so troublesome it is a pity they are not: they drink, and they neglect the poor little things, and maltreat them, and sometimes half kill them. I often think what a mercy it would be if the children of the poor could be born orphans!'

'What a pity the parents don't kill them right off! Then the poor little wretches would go to heaven, instead of living to grow up and go to hell, like their parents,' said Narka.

'Oh, what a dreadful thing to say! Their parents generally die much better than they live. They have suffered so much, poor things, that God waits for them at the end.'

'Ah, does He? I have often noticed how peacefully the peasants die with us.'

'The poor die peacefully everywhere; they have found it so hard to live, that it comes easy to them to die, even when they die as criminals. Death is always a release to them. I am very anxious just now about a poor man . . . Mathilde, didn't you promise Sœur Lucie you wouldn't scratch your eye if she took the bandage off? If I see you scratching it again, I'll have it put on this minute! . . . His name is Antoine Drex. Such a sober, hard-working fellow, and so good to his mother! But he married a dreadful woman who drank, and then he took to drink. One night he came home and found her dead-drunk on the floor. He went to bed, and in the morning, there she lay in the same place dead, with a great cut in her temple. He was taken up for murder; they said he gave her the blow on her head; and they have kept him in prison ten months without trying him. I am afraid they will neither acquit him nor condemn him to death, but let him off with hard labour.'

'Do you ever get to care for any of those dirty brats?' asked Narka contemptuously.

'For any of them?' Marguerite repeated in innocent surprise. 'I care for them all. I love every one of them!'

'What a capacious heart you must have!'

'Oh, not half capacious enough!' Marguerite sighed, quite unconscious of the covert sneer. 'I wish it were ten times bigger. If only I could empty it of self, then God would come and fill it, and make room for everybody!'

'Oh, Marguerite!' Narka burst out with sudden vehemence, 'why can't you find a corner in it for me? I do so want a crumb of sympathy!'

Marguerite looked up quickly, and in a moment her whole heart was in her eyes. She dropped her knitting, and put her hand on Narka's arm.

'You are in trouble? Oh, dear Narka, why did you not tell me that at once? What is the matter? What has happened?'

'I am in terrible trouble, Marguerite,'

Narka said; and pride and self-control broke down, her voice shook, her eyes filled, and the tears overflowed.

Marguerite hesitated for a moment; then quilting her needles, she looked up at a window on the first story, and called out, 'Sœur Claire!' There was no answer. 'She is not there. Never mind. Come indoors.'

'But the children?' said Narka, fearful of getting her into trouble.

'Let their angels look after them! What else have they got to do?' said Marguerite, gallantly reckless. 'But I can keep an eye on them from the parlour.'

They went into the parlour, whose window commanded a view of the playground. It was a square room with white walls, and a polished oak floor, straw chairs, and a round table; a white Christ on a black cross hung over the fireplace. Marguerite stirred up the shabby make-shift of a fire, and drew two chairs close to it, her own facing the window.

'Sit down and warm yourself, dear, and tell me what is the matter,' she said, as if Narka's trouble were suddenly her one interest in life.

And Narka poured out her story, Marguerite listening as if she had no longer any care on earth but to share her sorrow, and comfort it. Never before had Narka realized what a healing balm there is in human sympathy; and Marguerite's sympathy was strong as fire, and sweet as a child's kiss.

With extraordinary quickness she grasped the whole case, her shrewd practical sense noting every detail, measuring difficulties and chances. The situation was bad enough, but by no means hopeless. She said so, supporting her opinion by sensible arguments that carried judgment with them, if not conviction. Presently, by the strength of her sympathy and her buoyant nature, she had lifted Narka from the depths of despair and compelled her to take a more hopeful view of everything. Basil's love had already proved itself equal to the pressure of antagonistic

circumstances; it had stood the test of absence; it was not likely to break down before the opposition of his father; he was full of resources and of energy; and they were both so young: in fact, there were many anchors of hope to cling to.

'But Sibyl!' Narka exclaimed; 'oh, Sibyl! —the thought of her breaks my heart!'

'Dear Narka, you are suffering as much from the destruction of an idol (which is always a good thing for us, darling, however painful) as from the blow that she has dealt you. Half of our misery in life comes from this setting up of idols; for the idol is certain to fall down some day with a crash, and we get crushed under it.'

'But I thought I knew Sibyl as I know my own heart. I never could have believed it!'

'There is nearly always something in our fellow-creatures' hearts — and even in our own—that we never know, or could have believed, until some test unexpectedly reveals it to us.'

'I suppose so; and that is the cruellest part of adversity; it is always applying that test to our fellow-creatures, and compelling us to try them. If only one might go on to the end trusting and believing in those we love without ever having to test them.'

'It is sometimes good for us to be tested,' said Marguerite.

Narka did not answer. Presently she said:

'Do you think that if Sibyl knew the truth, she would hate me and curse me as bitterly as she does now without knowing it?'

'It is very hard to say what Sibyl would do, she is so many characters all in one; yet when I remember the agonies of grief she certainly did suffer when you were imprisoned, and how tenderly fond she was of you at Yrakow . . . I can see her now when we were coming away, clinging to you as if she could never unclasp her arms and let you go.'

'Ah! yes; that was just what deceived me. She took me to her arms, but she never took me to her heart; I can see that now. She

has been feeding me on false sacraments of love all my life. And to think that I must be dependent on her for the means of earning my bread! Oh, if it were not for Basil, I would rather starve a hundred times!'

'You need not torment yourself about that just yet,' said Marguerite; 'I may be able to help you. I know a great number of people. I will speak to several friends of mine, and we will find you some lessons. Try and don't fret over that trouble; and you must stay at home and take care of yourself for a few days, or else you will certainly fall ill. I will come and see you with Sibyl in a day or two, and——'

'Sibyl!' Narka broke in. 'She can't come to me. The baby is ill with small-pox.'

'Nonsense! It is nothing but chicken-pox. I saw the child this morning; I forgot to tell you. I called there before I went to the Rue du Bac. Sibyl sent yesterday, imploring me to come at once: she was in an agony of grief, and wanted my sympathy. But I have something else to do besides

flying across the town with my sympathy; and as nobody was dead, I suspected it was some imaginary grief, as in fact it proved. But this morning came a message saying the baby was dying, so I went. It was nothing at all. The doctor had just been, and laughed at it. Sibyl was lying down, and could not be disturbed, and Gaston had gone out riding.'

'Gaston is very good to me,' Narka said.

'He has a great regard and admiration for you, and he would do anything in his power to serve you.'

'I believe that,' said Narka, tightening her grasp of his sister's hand.

Marguerite noticed that the hand which had been shivering with cold a little while ago was now burning hot.

'I wonder whether you would do something to please me?' she said, in a caressing tone.

'Of course I would. What is it?' Narka answered.

'Well, go home and get into bed, and I

will give you something to take that will prevent your having a bad cold.'

She ran off to the dispensary, and was back in a trice with a small bottle and a mustard plaster.

'If your chest feels sore to-night, you must promise me to put this on,' she said; 'and I am going to send you home in a cab. Nonsense! I have plenty of money, and I can't afford to lose my sister Narka, or to let her lose her voice. Just think what that would be!'

Narka dropped her head on Marguerite's shoulder and burst into tears; but it was not a bitter flood, and it loosened the pressure on her brain. Truly God had entered into Marguerite's heart, and made it a Bethlehem, a house of bread, where the hungry might come and feed upon the bread of love, for want of which so many human lives are perishing.

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